

Episcopal Divinity School

Thesis/Project

Mindfulness for Post-Millennials: How Mindfulness Improves Adolescent Well-Being
and Strengthens Vocational Discernment

BY

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Dedication:

To my husband Justin, my children Micah and Jonah, and my parents, Peter and Linda,
who have supported me and allowed me to pursue my passions;
To my other family and friends, who have helped me become who I am;
To my students, who challenge and inspire me;
And to my fellow teachers, who are my vocational partners in this journey.

Abstract

This thesis/project is a response to the overwhelming levels chaos, stress, and anxiety among adolescents and offers strategies for helping them cope with it in a way that improves wellness and helps discern vocation. The students that I work with as a high school teacher in suburban Massachusetts want to be successful in their academic, social-emotional, and personal lives, but are often unsure of how to react to the demands of our increasingly chaotic society. Using mindfulness in denominational and faith-based youth programs can increase self-agency (i.e., the idea that oneself is the driving force behind the actions of the self), allowing students to access strategies within the self to engage with their inner voice. These strategies can then be applied in a variety of ways to make use of resources within the self to balance and regulate emotions, reduce stress, increase resiliency, increase attentiveness, and improve overall wellness.

This thesis/project has two major purposes. First, to establish the need for mindfulness in the lives of adolescents in a variety of settings. By showing the multitude of ways that it can help young people succeed, I show that mindfulness can improve the lives of teenagers on an emotional, physical, social, and academic level. By including several different strategies and methods for church leaders, youth directors, and pastors to integrate mindfulness and by presenting the idea of a multifaceted approach, I furnish leaders with the tools to engage with mindfulness in a variety of ways. The second purpose of this thesis/project is to show how mindfulness can help young people find their vocation. Instead of relying on teacher, pastor, or parent directed methods of career exploration, shifting to a mindset of vocational discernment will help students understand

how to use their gifts, talents, skills, and abilities to improve the world around them. By doing this, we can invite our young people to “be the change they wish to see in the world.”

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“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.” –Nelson Mandela, opening words of his speech at the launch of the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund in Pretoria, South Africa, May 1995

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Chapter 1: Introduction

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

Micah 6:8, NRSV

Millennials have been coined as the “least religious generation” in the history of America.¹ They are less likely to attend formal religious services, less likely to report that religion plays a significant role in their lives, and less likely to spend personal time in prayer or meditation. According to the Pew Research Center, thirty-five percent of millennials consider themselves religious “nones” compared with seventeen percent of baby boomers and only eleven percent of the silent generation,² and further research indicates that the “nones” are currently the fastest growing affiliation on record. Many millennials feel that they are “spiritual but not religious,” distancing themselves from a formal church, synagogue, or place of worship. Others have been hurt by religion personally because of perceived or genuine conservative religious attitudes that are not in line with their own social values. Still others see religious groups as a negative influence in the media and want to distance themselves from the pundits that take over the airwaves and other forms of mass media.

Even as I can’t deny the statistically decreasing affiliation with religion that is well documented, my experience both as a member of a church with an active youth group and as a public high school teacher points to two other important trends. First,

¹ Beth Downing Chee, “The Least Religious Generation,” *San Diego State University News Center*, (May 27, 2015), accessed May 2, 2017.

² Hillary Sorenson, “Millennials are the Least Religious Generation,” *The Dickinson Press*, (January 6, 2017), accessed May 2, 2017.

young people are curious about religion and want to see how and why it plays such a key role in the lives of so many people. When I piloted a “Theology and Philosophy” class at the high school where I teach, students signed up enthusiastically. For many students, “pluralism” and “multiculturalism” are buzzwords that have little to no meaning without context. Since many of them do not have a religious frame of understanding the world and many were not raised with a particular affiliation, some don’t even know the terminology with which to begin any investigation of faith and spirituality. In addition, the second trend that I have noticed is that adolescents are spiritually deprived and hungry for connections to something greater than the self. Millennials are often called “The Me Generation,” and CNN reported in 2015 that the average teenager spends nine hours a day using media or screens.³ Although I understand why others have coined Millennials as such, one argument that I will make in this thesis/project is that we as a community need to look at the ways that we have contributed to this attitude and seek out avenues for change. First, I will look at the role of adults in the lives of adolescents, speaking from my own social location as a high school teacher and as a volunteer youth leader. Second, I will analyze how the use of mindful meditation modeled after both Buddhist practices and from other traditions can be used by Christian faith-based groups to help millennials focus on the self without turning to selfishness or “me-ism.” Finally, I will bridge the gap between schools and churches to show how schools can better support the academic lives of students and help them develop a sense of knowing of or having a vocation.

³ Kelly Wallace, “Teens Spend a ‘Mind-boggling’ 9 Hours a Day Using Media, Report Says,” *CNN*, (November 3, 2015), accessed May 2, 2017.

Since this thesis/project primarily arose out of my experience working in public schools, I'd like to start by looking at the role of teachers in schools and in society. Social perceptions of teachers are extreme, misinformed, and inaccurate. The media has done nothing to help clarify these misconceptions. Some individuals feel that teaching is a glorified and overpaid form of babysitting, with teachers working only part of the day, having too much time off, and not trained in any specialized skills. They make the false assumption that if students have summers, weekends, and holidays off, so must teachers. Others see teachers as underpaid social service professionals, often commenting sympathetically on the difficulty of the job without really understanding the role of a teacher. Movies like *Dangerous Minds*, *Freedom Writers*, and *Mr. Holland's Opus* show teachers as self-sacrificing to a fault and help drive this stereotype home. These sentiments perpetuate the dangerous assumption that in order to be successful, teachers must give up on a personal life, social relationships, and privacy. Still others see teaching as employment or a career of last resort, which mirrors one social perception of teachers: "those who can, do... those who can't, teach." The prevalent myth about teachers is that somehow teaching isn't a choice but a result of poor choices or a fallback from other, more illustrious career choices—something that individuals do after having failed at other goals or career options. This devalues teaching as a vocation and only encourages the propagation of negative stereotypes. Teaching, as a career, is undervalued and misunderstood by the greater part of American society.

1.1 Teaching as Vocation

I am a teacher. Initially, some members of my family weren't too thrilled that I choose to be a teacher. Since one third of new teachers leave the classroom within three years and more than half of all teachers in the United States leave the classroom within the first five years,⁴ having reservations about the career path might be a smart notion. For many jobs, it's impossible to understand the role without being *in* the role, and nowhere is this more true than with teaching. However, the reservations of my family members had more to do with the negative myths about teaching than with the realities of teacher retention and success. My father didn't say much, but my mother in particular questioned the decision. Despite teaching over 10 years, my mother suggests a change occasionally. "Can't you write a book?" she asks from time to time, or she inquires "What about doing something with your degree in editing?" If I ever complain about some aspect of teaching, that opens the door. If I mention how I don't always feel like I'm making a difference with the students or I feel under-appreciated by my supervisor, she'll remind me again that it's not too late to go to law school, which she even offered to pay for before I started teaching. In a subtle way, what my mother is telling me is that she thinks I'm working below my potential. This mirrors the prevalent myth that teachers are somehow "less than", unintelligent, or under-performing.

Even as I approach the completion of my doctorate of ministry, many family members and friends have asked what I plan to do next, as if there is a logical "next step" once one earns a doctorate. It's a fair question in some ways: many teachers earn

⁴ Leslie Baldacci, "Why New Teachers Leave..." *American Educator*. American Federation of Teachers, (Summer 2006).

advanced degrees almost immediately after they start teaching in order to fast-track their way into administration. One of my previous administrators had only two years of teaching experience before leaving the classroom, and a former student of mine became a school administrator after teaching for less than five years, so quickly moving into administration isn't uncommon. However, for many teachers, the classroom is the beginning and the end of their journey. Unlike many other jobs, one often becomes a teacher to be a teacher, not necessarily as a stepping-stone toward career advancement. In fact, in the United Kingdom, a principal is referred to as a "head teacher", indicating that the role of "teacher" remains at the core of one's vocation. I wish that we did the same thing in the United States. If we use the title "head teacher", it recognizes the leadership role of the individual while at the same time prioritizing teaching as the core job function. If we did this, the idea of "vocation" would be clarified and prioritized, at least in the teaching profession. In addition, having more experienced administrators might reduce the amount of opposition between teachers and administrators since there would be more of an understanding of the difficulties of the job functions and the idea of teaching as a vocation, not just a job or career.

Vocation and career are vastly different, both ideologically and practically. Vocation stems from our very essence: it's at the core of who we are as individuals. Vocation fulfills a deep longing in oneself to meet the needs of society through our talents and gifts. It is through a vocation that a person can achieve satisfaction, happiness, and self-gratification. The definition of career is more limiting. Careers are what individuals do to make money, perhaps as a stepping-stone to something else down

the line. In very few careers does one frequently retire in the same position as he or she started, fulfilling the same job description and with the same set of responsibilities. Careers are sometimes even ranked in the way they do or do not grant individuals with “upward mobility”. In that way, and many others, teaching is exceptional. As a vocation, teaching is something that we are called to do; this vocation aligns with our strengths and our gifts, providing space for the world’s needs to be fulfilled by a teacher’s individual talents and abilities. Teaching *is* precisely my vocation, and not just my career.

1.2 Social and Professional Location

Having moved a lot as a child and attending schools up and down the east coast, I was always “the new kid” at school. For me, teachers and guidance counselors were vital parts of growing up. Even when other children were unkind, I could count on teachers to be helpful and to listen to what I had to say. Many even went as far as to ask questions and to make me feel valued. Whether it was in a tiny Lutheran school in Connecticut, a small Christian school with 4 other students in my third-grade class in Georgia, a large Catholic school, or a 2,000-student public high school in New Jersey, teachers mattered to me growing up. As a child, I never really knew what my friends’ parents did, not if it didn’t have a direct impact on me. The exception was always teachers and pastors. I knew that my best friend’s dad was a pastor because he was *my* pastor, my friend Julie’s grandmother was a teacher because she was *my* teacher, and my Sunday school teacher was a professor at the local college. Other than teachers or pastors, I can’t really say

what other parents did for work when I was in grammar school, middle school, or even high school. I do know that none of my friends' parents were teachers at my high school, possibly the result of teachers often being underpaid and having to live out of district because they couldn't afford the housing costs in the town where they worked, something I never would have thought of at the time and is often still true today.

My experiences in schools and church youth groups largely shaped who I have become. Growing up in church, whenever we discussed being "called" to a profession, it was always to be called as a missionary, pastor, or youth director, but never as a teacher, engineer, lawyer, or anything else. Being "called" or summoned to a particular activity, employment, or office was a concept strictly reserved for religious vocations. In addition, religious vocations were put into a higher category of value than other choices, and perhaps that was why they were defined as vocations and not choices. Vocations in the church arose out of spiritual gifts, but careers outside of it were just jobs. We would even talk about being "called" to volunteer at vacation bible school or to do a summer mission trip, but no one ever really discussed with me the idea of being called into the vocation of teaching. The idea of being called to a non-religious vocation was something I didn't come across until pursuing my master of divinity degree utilizing Parker Palmer's books, in particular *The Courage to Teach*. It wasn't until that moment, partway through my second graduate degree, that I felt called to be a classroom teacher. I felt a sense of urgency deep within the self that I hadn't felt before as I explored other "career" choices and possible trajectories for my future; I felt a passion for teaching as I saw my path mapped out in front of me clearly for the first time. If we define calling as a

summons to a particular activity, employment, or office, it was then that I felt the call. Vocation builds on one's calling: it is the fulfillment of the calling by living life's purpose with direction, focus, and full commitment. The impact of all this probably has been a compartmentalization of life from which I am still recovering. Americans, and I'm no exception, are great at putting their faith, work, and family life into different little boxes and only opening each box at the prescribed time, putting it away when necessary.

As a high school teacher and a member of a church with a growing youth group, I see a tremendous weakness in the connection that students have between the curriculum in schools and a sense of their knowing of or having a vocation. Of course, there are some students who are exceptions: those who love science or healing may apply directly to nursing, medicine, or physical therapy programs and those who fall in love with architecture may end up in a graphic design program. There are some—although fewer and fewer these days, it seems—who fall in love with the arts through participation in theater, orchestra, or art club and apply to art school. Yet a large majority of students and youth group members are not offered any opportunities for vocational discernment: that is to say that they are never given the space to perceive or become aware of knowing deeply their vocation. I work in a district where most students will attend college: Chelmsford is a town that in many ways does value education, and parents are somewhat involved in their children's schooling. The vast majority of youth members of my congregation, which draws from several local towns in both Massachusetts and New Hampshire, have also gone on to four-year colleges after graduating from high school. However, in the past 10 years, I have seen a large number of students dropping out of

college in the first or second years of their program. Sometimes, this is the result of academic under-preparation or an inability to cope with living away from home. At other times, I think it is the result of students not feeling a burning passion for what they are studying or failing to find meaning in their schoolwork. Students don't connect academics with vocational choices early enough, and this is detrimental to their later success; they do not see the relationship between "feeling a burning passion for what they are studying" to what may or could be their life's passion and purpose in the future throughout their lives. Almost half of students in the United States who start a college program don't complete it within six years, and the rate has been steadily declining.⁵ That means, for many, enormous loans to repay for a degree that they never received. It also means that students will be out in the workforce without a degree that will help to increase their earning potential and to support a family.

Looking back on my experiences, I now realize that I lacked opportunities for vocational discernment in my church youth group and in the high school I attended, both of which were wonderful communities in many other ways. My vocational discernment process started in college, as it does for many of our young people today. As an undergraduate student at Boston University, there were two things that helped point me in the direction toward teaching, albeit unintentionally. The first one was a professor. In my last two years at Boston University, I took several classes with Peter Hawkins, who was the director of the Luce Program in Scripture and Literary Arts. Aside from being an

⁵ Paul Fain, "College Completion Rates Decline More Rapidly." *Inside Higher Ed.* (November 15, 2015), accessed April 1, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2015/11/17/college-completion-rates-decline-more-rapidly>.

astonishingly accomplished scholar, Professor Hawkins was a gifted mentor, teacher, and guide. He sat me down for lunch and asked me why I was applying for Ph.D. programs in literature. I answered, of course, that I loved literature. However, he saw in me another vocation: while I loved literature then and still love it now, the kind of study that I would have been doing in a Ph.D. program wouldn't have aligned with my ministerial gifts or vocation. He suggested, instead, that I apply to M.Div. programs. Having grown up in a church where ordination wasn't an option for women⁶, I had never considered the possibility of studying in a seminary program, and I didn't understand the wide variety of vocations that could be cultivated using a divinity school education. He saw in me an academic love of literature and a personal interest in religion that could be combined through further study in a way that I had not yet imagined. I was fortunate to have a mentor who understood vocation in a way that I did not yet comprehend. He saw in me a desire to work in ministry and service that I had admittedly felt, but had often ignored, and was able to direct me toward that vocation in a practical way. This is exactly the kind of guidance that students at all levels need. High schools and even colleges are not focusing enough on helping students develop a vocation, and I argue that church-based

⁶ I grew up attending services at a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church. Of the two largest branches of the Lutheran church in the United States (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, or ELCA, and Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, or LCMS), the LCMS is the smaller and more conservative of the two. The LCMS does not traditionally allow for the ordination of women or the full acceptance of the GLBT community, for example. The LCMS has a strong public stance against abortion as well, seeing it as a violation of the fifth commandment. In addition, the LCMS subscribes to a much more literal and less critical interpretation of scripture. Since attending college, I have joined and maintained by membership at an ELCA church, which is more in line with my own beliefs and theological understanding. In addition and of personal importance to me, the ELCA is in communion or even full communion with other church bodies, such as Episcopalians, Methodists, and Baptists. This means that members can give and receive communion at other churches and even preside over worship services. To an outsider, or to myself as an adolescent, the differences between the ELCA and LCMS can be unclear, but they are numerous and theologically significant once one investigates closely.

youth programs or service organizations can help fulfill this need. As I traversed college in my movement toward teaching, my earlier experiences and conversations with Professor Hawkins stuck with me.

The second experience that helped point me in the direction toward teaching was discovering, through working as a resident assistant in both college and graduate school, that I loved caring for others. In addition to it being something that brought me deep satisfaction, I found that I developed caregiving skills in working with and for others. In my own life, I was often the recipient of the caregiving of others, beginning in my family and continuing in a variety of ways in college by staff members when it came to the necessities of life. Being a student in higher educational programs for so many years, I also became aware that I was learning caregiving skills to work with my peers. Living in a college community for so many years helped me see the value in caregiving, too. As I supported first year students who struggled with homesickness, breakups, eating disorders, financial insecurity, depression, anxiety, and countless other problems, my respect for the role of caregiver increased. I learned conflict resolution by assisting students who had never even shared a bathroom as they negotiated the terrain of sharing a bedroom, closet, and everything else with anywhere between one and three other people. The issues that arose over things as simple as taking out the trash and things as complex as race and religion introduced me to a variety of conflicts that I had always had the privilege not to know. I discovered that schools, both colleges and high schools, are and continue to be some of the most economically and racially segregated institutions in our society. Sometimes this is by choice, as in college dining halls and dormitories, and

sometimes it is based on a complex history of oppression and privilege that started long before students arrived on campus.

As a student at Harvard Divinity School, I finally found my vocation. I didn't know it when I entered the school, but there existed at the time a part of the divinity school called "The Program in Religion and Secondary Education." It was a dimension of Harvard Divinity School where one could still fulfill all the traditional requirements for a master of divinity or a master of theological studies degree, yet also get certified to teach through a partnership with the Harvard Graduate School of Education. What attracted me to the program was that I would be trained in how to appropriately integrate a study of religions into the public school curriculum. A vocation that included caring for and giving to others through my calling as a teacher in a public high school curriculum that allowed for the study of religion became clear. When I went to the information session during orientation week, I had no way of knowing at the time that this decision would be one of the best and most important decisions I would make in my three years at Harvard. Almost immediately, I felt that here was a means to use my interests, talents, and gifts in a way that was appropriate, fulfilling, and meaningful. The idea of uniting my interests in theology, philosophy, and literature—all of which I had majored in as an undergraduate at Boston University—with the passion for working with young people that I'd found as a resident assistant and youth leader was fantastic. I signed up for the program immediately, making the necessary changes to fit the requirements of the program into my divinity school studies. At age twenty-three and in my second graduate program, I had finally found my vocation.

My race, gender, class, sexuality, ableness, and education have generally, as far as I am aware, had a positive impact on me. Being aware of my own privilege as a white person with a formal education, I know that I am only where I am today because someone else is not, and this is something I feel guilty about on a somewhat regular basis. When I see some of my high school students who are just as qualified as I was not getting into schools like Boston University or not being able to afford it, my heart breaks a little bit for them, even if I know that where they go to college will not make or break who they become as a person. I do what I can to help them make the best decisions that are within their means, all the while knowing that their choices are often limited by factors beyond their influence. I also try to integrate lessons into the curriculum that teach students how privilege plays a role in what we as individuals do and do not do, and how privilege can be used to inform decision making, not just limit it. Although it can be difficult at times, I will continue to develop methods for engaging these topics in the current curriculum even as I write new curriculum and develop new classes for students.⁷ Being aware of my own social location as I do so is important for developing authentic and meaningful course content.

⁷ For example, I've noticed that the 11th grade American Literature Curriculum is dominated by white male authors: Hawthorne, Thoreau, Twain, Emerson, Kesey, Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, and Anderson, just to name a few. While it is possible to integrate diverse voices alongside the major texts, such as teaching Frederick Douglass along with *Huck Finn* or Martin Luther King Junior along with Thoreau, it's not enough. I already developed two different senior electives to address the lack of diverse religious voices in the curriculum: one course called "Theology, Philosophy, and Moral Lessons in Literature" and a course called "Heaven, Hell, Angels, Demons, and Last Things". We need to do more to address the lack of gender and racial diversity in the curriculum as well. In the future, I'd like to develop a course on gender in literature, with possible course titles being: "Gender and Sexuality: Beyond the Binary" or "Gendering the Book". I'd also like to develop a course called "Banning the Book" where the topics and readings could change from year to year, which is unusual for a high school course. The key to these courses would be including diverse voices as key texts, not as "side pieces" that supplement the main texts, making them seem less important.

One worry I have is that teaching is becoming less of a career and more of a service industry than it should be. In theory, “We serve but we are not servants”, but in reality teachers are often treated as such. That is to say, teaching is becoming a lower-status and lower-class form of service industry than previously. An analogy to illustrate what I mean comes from my own experience working as a waitress in high school and college. Even as I loved the work, part of which was about discerning the right food to suggest to the right people, I also felt that people were unnecessarily dismissive or rude at times. I initially tolerated it more than I should have, probably because I was young, inexperienced, and socialized to never cause conflict, especially if I wanted a tip. In addition, the more experience I acquired as a waitress, through high school and college, the less tolerant I became of people treating me like I was stupid when I was waiting on them in the restaurant, something I know now I never really should have tolerated in the first place. Although there’s a valuable message in that—education is power—people with unexamined power, privilege, and advantage treat those who serve them with less respect and dignity than they treat their peers. I worry that parents and those in society-at-large see teachers as servers. I am the waitress who gives your child an A or A minus so that he or she can get into college. The equivalent of sending food back would be a sternly worded email, cc’ing the dean and guidance counselor about an “unfair” assignment, policy, or grade. I remember in particular one parent, also a teacher in another district, who called the dean weekly while I spent a summer in Italy on a teacher education program, requesting and eventually receiving a grade change from a 78 to an 80 for his daughter. To me, that’s the equivalent of a patron receiving a free meal or a

person using their advantaged status over a teacher so that the claim can be made that “The customer is always right”, even if it’s not in the best interests of the student and disregards the experience and professionalism of the teacher.

1.3 Organization of Thesis

The first claim of this thesis/project is that vocational discernment is not addressed in an authentic way in American high schools. The second claim is that mindfulness is one primary means for engaging young people in the process of vocational discernment. Church-based youth ministry programs that want to support the academic lives of the adolescents in their programs can find success in working mindfulness into existing youth programs or by creating new mindfulness-based youth programs and opportunities. In addition, groups in private secondary education settings may also find success with this program. My experience indicates that there is not only a need for opportunities like this, but also a desire on the part of youth to participate in these opportunities. Young people often have trouble understanding the relevance that faith and religion have to their own lives, and I argue that helping bridge the gap between their lives at school and their spiritual lives will not only strengthen their understanding of vocation, but it will also strengthen their faith and participation in the church. One challenge of youth programs is in how pastors, lay ministers, and youth directors can make the church relevant to the everyday lives of young people, and engaging with them to help discern vocation through mindfulness is an underused key to meeting that challenge. New tools are called for in order that churches and faith-based organizations

meet the spiritual curiosity and needs of young people in and beyond the walls of the church, and I am suggesting that mindfulness programs are a fundamental way of doing so.

Mindfulness can help our young people in a diverse range of ways. The process of mindfulness is a strategy for increasing the potential to focus in the moment, decreasing the anxieties of teenage life, engaging in self-awareness, and developing a sense of purpose and place in the context of a larger society. The ability to see the self in relation to others is one key component of developing vocation, and mindfulness is an important strategy for doing that. Grounding one's self in the moment for focus, concentration, and the practice of attention can help develop academic, social, and emotional skills needed for long-term attainment. Mindfulness can support adolescents as they begin to think about vocation, no matter what careers or professions they may have throughout life. The kind of attentive awareness that develops through mindfulness is part of discerning who teenagers are and the kinds of things they want to dedicate themselves to as they make choices about vocation. This is one component of deciding how they will serve the world beyond the self.

Having a background in theology, without a formal “education” degree, makes me unique in the classroom as well as in the church pew. I have found the impact to be more positive than negative in both places, and the perspective I gain from a broad study of world religions puts me in a position that benefits students in my congregation and in my classroom directly. In general, I find that young people, both believers and non-believers, are curious about religion and open-minded when it comes to learning about

the faith of others. For example, when I introduced a “Theology and Philosophy” class into the curriculum at the high school where I teach, it was well received, and at its height, six out of the fifteen sections of the senior English class were theology classes. Although I know there are many factors as to why students choose to take one class over another, it still speaks to a high level of interest in the subject area and openness to new ideas on the part of students and parents. At the same time, many of the students who sign up for the course are non-theists and others disagree with many aspects of the faith communities they have been raised in. I also know that statistically speaking and in relation to the increasing trend of the millennial “nones” I spoke about earlier, only a few who come from faith-based backgrounds will stay involved in faith communities after the completion of ceremonies like bar and bat mitzvah or confirmation: they don’t always see the relevance that religion can have in their daily lives.

Having a background different from other teachers also gives me another lens to look at the lives of my students and the programs that high schools offer. Although integrating mindfulness into public school-based programs is currently problematic because of concerns that the practice-based nature of mindfulness programs may be in violation of the first amendment,⁸ I still see potential for these programs to be beneficial

⁸ For some discussion of this, see the following articles: “Mindfulness: Stealth Buddhist Strategy for Mainstreaming Meditation?” by Candy Gunther Brown (*Huffington Post*); “The Mindful Revolution: Finding peace in a stressed-out, digitally dependent culture may just be a matter of thinking differently,” by Kate Pickert (*Time*); or “Hide the Religion, Feature the Science,” by Jeff Wilson (*Religion Dispatches*). There have also been several court cases regarding the issue of mindfulness in public schools, such as *Sedlock v. Baird*, which challenged the use of Ashtanga Yoga in public schools in Encinitas, California, ruling that its use was religious in nature. There is a current conflict on Cape Cod in the Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District regarding the use of “Calmer Choice Curriculum”, a mindfulness based strategy that is being used in the schools there, which has garnered the attention of the National Center for Law and Policy. One solution to this may be that schools offer these programs after school during non-instructional time and that they be voluntary, but it would not solve all of the relevant parental concerns. Another

in the lives of adolescents. Best practices presently dictate that mindfulness take place in faith-based contexts. I will use what I have learned about the importance of mindfulness to help show how these programs can support Christian youth in faith-based programs.

The claims I make in this thesis/project are drawn from my own experience and understanding of students that I have taught in the classroom, worked with in community service programs, and ministered to as a lay member of my own congregation. Rather than a statistical methodology or a data driven study, I have piloted mindfulness activities with small groups of students to measure results. More general comments come from the writing in the field about the practices of mindfulness and the benefits that it can provide for individuals, which has helped me establish the validity of my claims that exists outside of my own experience. I hope that sharing these methods and experiences will be useful to others reading this who are thinking about ways to help direct young people toward vocations that are appropriate, meaningful, and fulfilling.

Even though it took me until my third post-high school education program to find my vocation, I found it earlier in my life than many others do. My goal is to help develop the idea of vocation for adolescents so that they can find their calling earlier than many of us are able to. I am saddened with many aspects of the current educational policies that are data-driven instead of student-focused, and I worry that the very things that I was called into teaching to do are being made obsolete or at the very least becoming more difficult. I became a teacher in order to help students learn more about themselves and the world around them. Teachers can and should compel students to be agents of social

possible solution, having mindfulness take place off site and in faith-based church youth groups, is the solution that this thesis/project will address.

change and challenge systems of injustice in the world around them. My vocation as a teacher in the public school classroom is the result of a deeply felt call to help smooth the transition from adolescence to adulthood and inspire students to become leaders. It is essential that we re-imagine the role of vocational discernment in order to meet the diverse needs of young people, and that is part of what this thesis/project has been about for me.

Life in the “post-millennial” generation is challenging and chaotic. Demands on students have increased, but we are failing to show students how their work in the classroom can extend beyond high school and work its way into a sense of knowing of or having a meaningful vocation. I want to see more opportunities for vocational discernment for young adults, and developing a sense of mindfulness is one key way to do that. Students are workhorses in American high schools. They are encouraged to be athletes, scholars, and frequent volunteers. They are looked at in numbers and evaluated on a daily basis on tests, quizzes, and presentations. Grading has become as competitive as athletics, with class rank being a substantial determining factor in the college admissions process. Introducing young people to mindfulness-based meditation is a gift for them: giving them the space of a few moments where nothing is asked of them but to breathe in and out can be powerful. However, this thesis/project will show that mindfulness is a great deal more than “doing nothing”. I hope that this project proves that mindfulness-based meditation programs and the positive outcomes that result from them are worth the investment. Our students and the young people in our congregations are worth the investment.

Chapter 2

Meeting Mindfulness

“Meditation is not a way of making your mind quiet. It’s a way of entering into the quiet that’s already there—buried under the 50,000 thoughts the average person thinks every day.” –Deepak Chopra

“In today’s rush we all think too much—seek too much—want too much—and forget about the joy of just being.”—Eckhart Tolle

No matter what we are doing, chaos beckons. Whether we are going to work, preparing for school, rounding up kids for a meal, or even planning a vacation, we are inundated with tasks, choices, and information. We are invited daily into a world of pandemonium and disorder. The stress that it produces is widely felt anecdotally but also tangibly measurable. The American Psychological Association reports that well over half of all Americans feel stress related to money, work, family responsibilities, health concerns, and the economy.⁹ This stress has a lasting impact on young people. Today’s youth are experiencing increasing levels of stress for a variety of reasons, and the demands put on teenagers do not seem to be letting up. Students experience stress from parents, stress about grades, stress from social media, stress about financial matters, stress about health issues and body image, and stress about friends and social networks, just to name a few. These all invite them into the chaotic world of adulthood far sooner than some of them are ready for. Rather than just accepting the chaos as the norm and “making do”, I suggest that mindfulness can be a useful tool for helping teenagers cope with the stress in their daily lives. Mindfulness does not ignore chaos or sweep problems

⁹ “Stress Snapshot: 2015 Stress in America.” *American Psychological Association* (2017), accessed April 1, 2017, <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2015/snapshot.aspx>.

under a rug; mindfulness trains individuals to accept the existence of the disorder and stress in our lives and respond to it in ways that are helpful, appropriate, and healthy. A person who engages in practiced attention to the self in the present moment is better able to meet their daily lives of chaos with courage and tackle problems appropriately. Teenagers and young adults who engage in mindfulness are more able to confront their social and emotional stresses and, ultimately, see how their learning fits into their lives beyond school through vocational discernment. Mindfulness, when built into one's life as a regular, focused practice, becomes a root response to the chaos of daily life, not just a quick fix.

As adults, we live in a world that is increasingly chaotic. Daily lives are filled with appointments, to-do lists, and activities. Multi-tasking is no longer a rarity, but it's an accepted norm. Parents bring work to kids' soccer games so they can multi-task on the sidelines, teenagers listen to audio-books while they work out so that they can "fit it all in", and people still feel like they have an increasingly extensive list of things to do. Families in America can barely find time to get together for the holidays, let alone a nightly family dinner. According to CNN, only 59% of American families find the time to eat dinner together at least five times per week. The absence of this time together is due to an extensive variety of factors.¹⁰ However, research shows that time spent with families has a positive outcome, and according to *Psychology Today*, "A study done by The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse revealed that teens who eat

¹⁰ It's hard to isolate the impact that eating together has on a family as a single factor. Since other factors are at play, like single parent vs. dual parent households, family structure, race and socio-economic class of parents, parental level of education, etc., evaluating the impact can be difficult. For a comprehensive study, see Eliza Cook and Rachel Dunifon at Cornell University's College of Human Ecology, who published a paper called "Parenting in Context: Do Family Meals Really Make a Difference?"

fewer than three family dinners per week compared to those who eat five to seven a week are twice as likely to use alcohol and tobacco and one and a half times more likely to use marijuana.”¹¹ Time spent engaged with family is useful on a physical, emotional, and social level. At the same time as I recognize the importance of mindfulness in the lives of adults and many of the strategies I introduce can be useful for adult practitioners as well, I focus on the practice and impact of mindfulness on school aged children in church-related youth groups and programs.

Stress levels in Americans are at an all-time high, with many adults and teenagers engaging in psychotherapy or reporting the need for prescription drugs to deal with stress and anxiety. Stress among American adults is not only a reflection of the stress among youth and teenagers, it’s a contributing factor as well. Largely as a result of parental stress,

“Children’s lives are much more stressful today as well. When adults live at a hurried, frenetic pace, their children are at the receiving end. Our society has changed in many ways that increase pressure on children and compromise their childhood. Many parents are working longer hours and are allowing work to intrude on their lives anywhere and everywhere. As a result, more children are spending substantial amounts of time with multiple caregivers.”¹²

Not only does this reality lead to a lack of consistency at home, but it also leads to less “downtime” to spend relaxing together as a family. The rejuvenation that comes from downtime is essential to stress relief and, as I’ll show later, even productivity. Schools are developing intervention programs to help students cope with the stress of being students, businesses report higher levels of stress among workers, and families are feeling

¹¹ Mark Banschick, “The Family Dinner: Summer barbecues and dinners together make important memories,” *Psychology Today*, (June 21, 2013), accessed February 21, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-intelligent-divorce/201306/the-family-dinner>.

¹² Linda Lantieri, *Building Emotional Intelligence* (Boulder, Colorado Sounds True, 2014), 11.

the burden of all that stress. Instead of dealing with the symptoms, it would make more sense to deal with the root causes. “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”... or so the old adage goes.¹³

Mindfulness can change our practices and attitude toward response, focus, and rejuvenation in the midst of the chaos beyond our control and lower our stress as we meet the complexities of our day and of our lives. We need to change our mindset to focus more on prevention rather than symptomatic treatment. Americans tend to treat the symptoms of disease rather than the sources, wanting a quick fix rather than working toward long term prevention programs. Perhaps we need to start looking at the roots of these problems rather than the trunk, branches, and leaves. If so, eradicating the problem may be easier.

There are organizations that are already recognizing this. Meditation programs are popping up in some businesses and schools that see value in the cultivation of mindfulness. It is no surprise that Apple has adopted mindfulness programs for employees (it is widely known that Steve Jobs practiced meditation), but so have companies like Google, Nike, HBO, and Procter & Gamble. Big businesses know that mindfulness can increase overall happiness and boost productivity. The need for the cultivation of mindfulness is at a critical juncture: mindfulness can help individuals not only physically but socially and emotionally as well. Mindfulness, in its simplest form, is merely being attentive to the present moment. Barry Boyce, senior editor of the *Shambhala Sun*, reminds us that mindfulness is “a basic human capacity. It’s not a talent.”

¹³ This axiom, attributed to Ben Franklin, was originally used to address the topic of fire safety. However, colloquially it has now been extended to encompass overall health and well-being.

We all have it. We all need it. And yet, it is so often elusive.”¹⁴ Even though mindfulness is something anyone can achieve, it’s difficult given the current state of affairs in our society that actively discourages it.

Some individuals tend to think meditation is too difficult for them, too time consuming, or an inauthentic fad. Others argue that it is simply “doing nothing” or it takes too long to show results, and they don’t have the time to commit to it. Many others would rather just be glued to their smartphones as an outlet. I am addressing the idea of integrating a formal mindfulness program into faith-based youth programs, always remembering that mindfulness at its core is simply allowing ourselves to put aside the past and future and focus on the present moment, whatever one is engaged in at the time. The simple and practical skills that it teaches can be applied on an individual and personal level outside of any formalized program. There are programs for mindful eating, mindful parenting, mindful exercise, mindful meditation, and much more. Mindfulness can take on a variety of forms, yet at its core, mindfulness encourages presence and attention to ourselves and the space around us in the present moment: our feelings, our bodies, our fears, and all of the aspects of our mind and body that make us who we are.

In addition, we need to remember that mindfulness has an important place in different religions. Although Buddhism is only the fifth largest religion in the United States at just shy of 1% of the population, the religion is growing, and many who don’t

¹⁴ Barry Boyce, *The Mindfulness Revolution: Leading Psychologists, Scientists, Artists, and Meditation Teachers on the Power of Mindfulness in Daily Life*, (Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2011), xi.

identify as Buddhist still participate in activities such as yoga, guided meditation, and breathing exercises. I know even at the high school where I teach, many of the coaches¹⁵ use guided visualizations to help bolster the performance of athletes. A major delimitation of this thesis/project is discussing the benefits of mindfulness in a Christian setting, particularly working with high school aged youth who draw from a variety of different school settings but gather together for social and spiritual activities external to school. I recognize that the mindfulness practices introduced here rely heavily on Buddhist practices; ideally, youth groups could use this fact as an opportunity to explore how individuals can grow and expand their faith by understanding and participating in the religious traditions of those of different faiths. By inviting students to explore “the other” not just academically or superficially but in practice, my hope is that their own faith is strengthened.

Mindfulness as practiced in the United States is largely rooted in Buddhist thought, and in addition there is a rich history of contemplative thought in other religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Introducing Christian youth to ideas of mindfulness as a meditation practice to center on self, train in attentiveness, and immediate context for rejuvenation is the core goal; I want to expand the idea of meditation and mindfulness beyond the Buddhist religious frame it is often boxed into so that individuals of other religious or nonreligious belief systems can benefit as well. Since there are measurable physical and non-physical benefits of mindfulness, the goal of

¹⁵ The girl’s swimming coach and the track coach at the high school where I work both use this method before major competitions.

this thesis/project is to seek to explore the ways that mindfulness can work in Christian youth group settings.

One area where there has been enormous success in using mindfulness is in the area of medicine. Because of its documented success, I argue that we can use this example as a model for establishing mindfulness programs in youth group settings. The same strategies that work in clinical settings with patients can work in faith-based settings with adolescents. Jon Kabat-Zinn established one of the most foundational formal mindfulness programs at the University of Massachusetts in 1979. After studying molecular biology at MIT, he began to investigate the integration of body and mind when it came to the science of healing. Studying with teachers such as Thích Nhất Hanh and Seung Sahn, he developed a formal program on mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) that is now used in hospitals across the nation. At the time, it was one of the first programs of its kind in the United States and it is still viewed as a groundbreaking program in medicine. He initially started with patients who had chronic pain or other illnesses where traditional medicine had failed them. After finding positive results for those patients, he began to apply the same techniques to patients with other diseases, using them in conjunction with traditional western medicine. The reason that it was so groundbreaking was that it takes into account the mind when it comes to curing disease and physical ailments. Wellness becomes the result of a combination of the body and mind, not just a medical “cure.”

By means of this strategy, which is also known as “participatory medicine”, the patient’s wellness can be improved using practices like meditation, yoga, and stress

reducing body scans. Most importantly, mindfulness allows the patient to become actively engaged in the process of self-awareness, focus, and relaxation. It gives individuals the opportunity “to engage more fully in their own movement toward greater levels of health and well-being as a complement to whatever medical treatments they may be receiving, starting of course from where they are at the moment they decide to take up the challenge: namely, to do something for themselves that no one else on the planet can do for them.”¹⁶ With this in mind, it is based on the belief that

“all of us, by virtue of being alive, have deep interior resources for learning, growing, healing, and transformation that can be tapped, nurtured, and mobilized in the service of living a fuller and more optimal life on every level: from the most basic molecular and cellular levels (our genes, chromosomes, and cells) to higher levels of organization of the body (our tissues, organs, and organ systems, including the brain and the nervous system), to the psychological level (the domain of our thoughts and emotions), to the level of the interpersonal (the domain of the social and cultural, including our relationships with others, with society as a whole, and, of course, with the environment—the natural world of which we are an intimate part).”¹⁷

As a meditative focus for centering the mind and emotions, mindfulness is not so much a denial of stress as a daily norm, but the understanding that an individual’s response to stress can have a dramatic impact on healing the body. One’s response to stress *can* be regulated, both internally (biologically) and externally (our emotional response) and how one responds to stress in his or her daily life has a dramatic impact on physical wellness. My contention is that the same methods used in medical programs to help combat physical ailments can be adjusted to fit into church-related youth programs in order to

¹⁶ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2013), xlvi-xlviii.

¹⁷ Ibid., 171.

help adolescents and church leaders create more successful programs enriching the lives of adolescents in faith-based communities.

Together, libraries, the Internet, and local bookstores can direct a person to use mindfulness with young children,¹⁸ with employees, with professional athletes, in self-help groups, or with medical personnel. Any library search can show that different groups are investigating the idea of mindfulness and its benefits. There are books on mindfulness for very young children, books on mindfulness for busy moms (one book called it “momfulness”), books on the psychology of mindfulness, books on mindfulness for ministers, and more. However, not a tremendous amount of research exists on the benefits of formal mindfulness practices across denominational or faith-based youth group programs. Imagine the benefits of mindful meditation as part of a curriculum for Sunday schools, vacation bible schools, confirmation classes, or youth group meetings. With a push in many public schools toward standardized testing and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) classes, churches, synagogues, and mosques can work to fulfill a real need for young people to explore mindfulness when there doesn’t seem to be time, space, or resources in school curriculum to add in anything else.

¹⁸ In my research, I came across several books on mindfulness for elementary aged children. Since I have two young children at home, this is an area of personal interest to me. I also know that some of my readers will be working with younger age groups and could benefit from these texts. Since I have found it useful on occasion to bring children’s books into the high school curriculum, I know that children’s books can be successful with older youth as well: they increase student engagement and can remind adolescents of their own childhood experiences. Much of the research indicates that mindfulness programs are more successful the younger that they start. I found a few particularly helpful books that would work well as read alouds for young children either in a home based or youth group setting: *The Lemonade Hurricane: A Story of Mindfulness and Meditation* by Licia Morelli; *A Handful of Quiet: Happiness in Four Pebbles* by Thich Nhat Hanh; *Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids (and Their Parents)* by Eline Snell and Myla Kabat-Zinn; and *Puppy Mind* by Andrew Jordan Nance and Jim Durk.

Mindfulness as a way of reducing stress, increasing attentiveness and focus, improving happiness, understanding the self, and as a step toward vocational discernment will all be discussed. Despite the fact that mindfulness requires a time commitment in addition to all of the other requirements and commitments young people have, the benefits that it has on the other activities one engages in can actually increase productivity and concentration, and any experienced teacher or church leader knows that depth is more important than breadth. We must eliminate the notion that mindfulness is time consuming, and instead focus on how it might be time enhancing, since it can be practiced anywhere and, once cultivated, it can and should be practiced along with one's daily activities.¹⁹ Mindfulness is training in attentiveness, and I will show how that training will make other activities in the lives of adolescents more successful.

2.1 Waking up to Mindfulness

To restate, mindfulness is being aware of self in the present moment. Since many of us spend a significant portion of the day on autopilot or perhaps multi-tasking, this is a more difficult task than it appears to be. How often are we aware of other commuters on our way to work, for example? How often do we unthinkingly devour our breakfast as we walk to our cars or the subway? Are we really *present* at our kid's sporting events, recitals, and competitions, or are we worried about what we're making for dinner or the project due at work tomorrow? The result of this kind of mindlessness is that "it makes

¹⁹ Susan Smalley and Diana Winston, "Is Mindfulness for You?" in *The Mindfulness Revolution: Leading Psychologists, Scientists, Artists, and Meditation Teachers on the Power of Mindfulness in Daily Life*, ed. Barry Boyce (Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, Inc. 2011) 4.

us feel vaguely but persistently dissatisfied”, which can lead to unhappiness.²⁰

Mindfulness rejects the current model of “too much to do” and asks us to slow down our thinking and focus.

Many additions to the basic definition of true awareness can be made. First and foremost, at its core mindfulness is awareness of the self in the *present moment*, short, simple, and succinct. One can approach the present as the “now,” the moment in which one is breathing: it is not the past breath, or for that matter, the morning’s argument with a parent before leaving for school. It is also not the future, daydreaming about what will happen at Friday night’s party. The “now” that one can explore is in the sensation and feelings from head to toe, in the tension behind one’s eyes, in the temperature in the room, or in the sounds one observes in the present moment. The second important dimension to mindfulness is understanding it to include the aspect of not judging the present moment. Judgment often brings about other feelings and emotions and tears us away from the present. Judging is anxiety-producing, and mindfulness seeks to reduce anxiety. In this way, mindfulness models self-love and self-appreciation. It teaches individuals the practice of withholding judgment, at least for a few moments, and just being present. When introducing mindfulness for the first time to new practitioners, it is best to start with short (no more than 3-5 minutes) routines and remind them that meditation is a practice. When one’s mind wanders—and it will—one need not get mad or make judgments. Tell the individuals in the group to just kindly return to the present

²⁰ Jan Chozen Bays, “What is Mindfulness?” in *The Mindfulness Revolution: Leading Psychologists, Scientists, Artists, and Meditation Teachers on the Power of Mindfulness in Daily Life*, ed. Barry Boyce (Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, Inc. 2011) 4.

moment and to their own breath. Thirdly, cultivating mindfulness requires an intentional attention to the present moment and a refusal to focus on things that need to be done in the future or mistakes made in the past that we cannot change immediately, however important. Mindfulness allows a person to take a moment to put the past and future aside and not be anxious about things that need to be done. My belief is that the earlier we start teaching young people about mindfulness, the better. This is because “If as children they learn to honor silence, self-reflection, and going within, this way of being can follow them for the rest of their lives. It can become a daily practice for them to take a ‘heart and soul’ time for themselves.”²¹ To summarize, to be mindful is to be aware of the self, to be kind to the self, and to allow the self to put anxiety aside in the present moment.

Mindfulness has a long track record of established health benefits. People who meditate often report lower stress levels. Evidence for this has been tracked: it’s not just that individuals who meditate *feel* less stressed; in addition, they have measurably lower levels of the hormone cortisol in their bodies, which has been associated with stress. Those who practice meditation often report higher levels of satisfaction in their lives as well. This satisfaction trickles into relationships with others and overall levels of happiness. One reason for this is that mindfulness isn’t something that’s limited to a specified exercise. A key aspect of mindfulness is that “it spreads out into the activities of our life, bringing the light of heightened awareness, curiosity, and a sense of discovery to the mundane activities of life: getting up in the morning, brushing our teeth, walking

²¹ Linda Lantieri, *Building Emotional Intelligence*, 137-8.

through a door, answering a phone, listening to someone talk.”²² Although mindfulness in many ways challenges current models of thinking in our fast-paced society, “When we allow the mind to rest in the present, full of what is actually happening right now, redirecting it away from repeated fruitless excursions into the past or future or fantasy realms, we are doing something very important: conserving the energy of the mind. It remains fresh and open, ready to respond to whatever appears before it.”²³ By this measure, mindfulness can help us to see other areas of our lives that need improvement by *not* dwelling on a task list, which might be counter-intuitive, and instead being present to the daily life around us.

The best and most well established model for the success of mindfulness is the program I referenced earlier that was created by Jon Kabat-Zinn. His program has been adapted and expanded in over five hundred hospitals worldwide, and more than eighteen thousand people have graduated from the stress reduction clinic he spearheads at the University of Massachusetts.²⁴ Others have adapted his program in a variety of settings, both clinical and non-medical. Since his program has always been grounded in science, it has been attractive to those in a variety of diverse settings and from a wide variety of different cultural backgrounds. The benefits of this program have a long-established track record, and several studies have been published summarizing its positive results.²⁵

²² Jan Chozen Bays, “What is Mindfulness?” 6.

²³ Ibid., 5.

²⁴ Barry Boyce, *The Mindfulness Revolution*, xiii.

²⁵ The full extent of his program is explained in the book *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn. For a clear explanation of the intersection of his medical model and Buddhist spirituality, *The Mind’s Own Physician* is a scientific dialogue with the Dalai Lama on the healing power of meditation. The book is edited by Jon Kabat-Zinn and Richard J Davidson, and includes a variety of essays on the biology of meditation, its implications for mental and physical health, and its applicability in different settings.

One key aspect to establishing a routine of mindfulness is that it is an intentional practice. Inherently, many of us are not naturals when it comes to stillness and other different forms of self-reflection and meditation. Americans, particularly doctors, nurses, teachers, pastors, and first responders who provide caregiving to others, are overtaxed, overstressed, and spread too thin. As a high school teacher, I know that in the past 10 years I've seen responsibilities multiply, class sizes increase, and state mandated testing intensify. I see the same thing happening in other professions as well—nurses have higher patient-to-provider ratios, retail sales managers have more stores to manage, and administrative assistants have more responsibilities or more tasks to complete. It seems that no matter what profession you're in, it is almost expected to feel overworked. It is normal for us to divide our attention because we as individuals simply have so much to do. If humans were unable to divide attention, difficult situations would inevitably arise. If I was unable to listen to my children play at the same time I made dinner, the results could be catastrophic. If we were unable to talk to a spouse or friend while simultaneously driving a car, awkward situations and silences could result. As essential as mindfulness is, it's also important to recognize that it is natural for our minds to be focused on a variety of things at once. However, the problem is when the division of the mind becomes the norm and not the exception: mindless eating, getting to work without remembering the commute, or teaching a class on autopilot. Mindfulness recognizes that it is preferable to be present, and that it requires practice.

Sarah Silverton summarizes the two types of focus in what she calls the doing and being modes of the mind. She argues that the “doing mind” is what “allows us to stay

focused on completing tasks. It keeps us on track so that we keep in mind our end goal and continue until that is achieved... clearly, without the mind's ability to do this, getting through the complexities of the day would be very difficult; we might find ourselves half-dressed, lost on our way to work, or with supper burnt in the oven.”²⁶ Despite the fact that the doing, acting now mind is important, she argues that we overuse this mode of the mind. By operating in the “doing mind” too frequently, we miss out on opportunities to be present in our daily lives. Mindfulness is the training program that can keep us from defaulting to the “doing mode” too often. I will show in this thesis/project how the “being mind”, or participatory engagement with the self, is connected to self-agency or the idea that individuals generate their own actions: it is through this presence to self that individuals can regulate emotions, train and maintain attentional focus, develop awareness, and eventually begin the process of discerning true vocation. Development of the “being mind” is a key aspect of this process.

Even when an intentional practice of mindfulness is established, one must be careful that it does not become so routine that we slip back into the “doing mind” even as we engage in mindfulness process. Mindfulness requires practice and attention. As an example, Silverton reports how a participant in mindfulness practice had reached a roadblock. Richard had established a practice of mindfulness that included walking as a way of reducing stress, refreshing, and relaxing himself, but “he was surprised and concerned that often he didn’t feel relaxed or refreshed by his walks”, at least not in the

²⁶ Sarah Silverton, *The Mindfulness Breakthrough: The Revolutionary Approach to Dealing with Stress, Anxiety and Depression* (London: Watkins Publishing, 2012), 36.

way that he initially had.²⁷ His practice had become too habitual and routine. However, a few weeks into the process, he was able to come to an important discovery on his own. Perhaps it was because he saw mindfulness as an intentional practice that he was able to realize

that he had been going for a walk in order to get his walk *done*: it had become just another task to complete. He noticed that he was very focused on getting back home and the jobs that were waiting for him there. He also noticed that as he walked, he found himself thinking about work and repeatedly mulling over the same problems. He had been so focused on these thoughts that he hadn't even seen the trees and the spring flowers. He hadn't seen the wildlife, or the dogs playing, and he hadn't noticed the people as he passed them in the park.²⁸

The mindfulness practice that he had developed, all with good intentions, began to become too routine. By shifting from the “doing mind” into the “being mind”, he could regain the benefits of the practice simply by changing his mindset. Walking mindfully, for him, included choosing his walk with intention rather than a habitual pattern, observing the wildlife, noticing the colors and sounds around him, feeling the air against his skin, and even noticing the movements of his own body.²⁹ This simple shift in mindset, without very much change in the activity itself, had dramatic results. The shift from a “doing mind” to a “being mind” is simple, but allows for a multitude of benefits.

2.2 Taking Part in Health, Wellness, and Healing

One significant reason that mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) has been so successful in helping patients is in how much autonomy it gives to individuals in terms

²⁷ Ibid., 37.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 38.

of guiding their own health and healing. Since MBSR, often called participatory medicine, encourages greater awareness on the part of the patient, he or she becomes more engaged in the self-wellness process. Through efforts to “inspire people to learn more about their own bodies and about the role of the mind in health and illness as a fundamental element of their ongoing adventure in learning, growing, and healing,”³⁰ patients are expected to actively research their medical condition and be aware of current developments, allowing them to communicate more effectively with medical professionals as well as advocate for themselves more efficiently. Therefore, it becomes less about prescriptions and quick fixes and reflects more of an attitude shift. Patients are encouraged to see themselves as a key factor in the healing process. This practice of medicine “recognizes the fundamental unity of mind and body, and how essential it is for people to be active participants, whenever possible, in their own health care—by learning more about health in general and how to maintain and optimize it through their own efforts—in close collaboration with their doctors and the rest of the health care team.”³¹ This allowance for greater autonomy helps mitigate the lack of control that individuals often feels when faced with a health crisis or illness.

Giving agency back to the patient is one key factor in the success of MBSR. When applying this method to different church-based youth group settings, it is important to recognize the need for young people to have an active role in their own lives and in their choices, which will be a key factor to this program’s success. These methods will later be used to help adolescents in understanding vocation and their place in the world

³⁰ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 170.

³¹ Ibid., 171.

both in the present moment and as they mature and navigate the world of adulthood. The importance of participation on the patient's side is clear: patients see themselves as active contributors on the way to a healing and wellness.

I have just described how patient participation can improve the lives and agency of patients. Now I will turn to the ways in which this self-agency can benefit medical providers as well. Participatory medicine (sometimes included in the broader term *integrative medicine*, which indicates a self-awareness on the part of the patient) is important for doctors and medical professionals because it “emphasizes the importance for patients to be seen, met, and understood by their doctors, and to know that their needs will be acknowledged, taken seriously, and whenever possible, honored.”³² Doctors, sometimes overly focused on their clinical experience, are encouraged to listen to the patient that is in front of them, not just the knowledge that is behind them. This new model for medicine might represent a necessary paradigm shift, a “new perspective [that] acknowledges the central importance of thinking in terms of *wholeness* and *interconnectedness* and the need to pay attention to the interactions of mind, body, and behavior in any comprehensive effort to understand and treat illness.”³³ Applying this to a youth group setting, it would call for more attentiveness on the part of pastors and youth directors to the individual needs and strengths of each youth participant on the path to wholeness and wellness. By allowing adolescents to access their “primary natural antidepressant” through mindfulness, they are using resources that already exist within

³² Ibid., 171-2.

³³ Ibid., 172.

them to help heal themselves.³⁴ Programs that help young people develop resiliency and use their inner strengths to improve are more successful than prescriptive curricula. The group leader is a facilitator of change, but positive changes transpire as a result of the actions that an individual takes to promote wellness for him or herself. Participants become less dependent on the instructor as they develop self-awareness, self-agency, and even self-esteem.

The last key element of MBSR is the idea and practice of learning the body-scan meditation that a person does for him or herself. Kabat-Zinn describes the disparity between how individuals in society are oftentimes preoccupied with the appearance of their bodies but at the same time disconnected from its internal workings. Teenage anxiety about physical appearance is extraordinarily high: it is one of the top three causes of stress among high school aged youth in America today. One of the reasons my students tell me that they prefer taking “selfies” to more traditional photographs is that it puts them in control: they control what the photo looks like, whether it’s shared with others, and who it includes. Kabat-Zinn cites deep-seated insecurities as a root cause of how obsessed people are with appearances.³⁵ He suggests that being more in-tune to one’s own body can make a person more familiar with its inner workings, perhaps being able to notice when something is not quite right. Body scan meditation involves the “thorough and minute focus on the body [and] is an effective method for developing both concentration and flexibility of attention simultaneously.”³⁶ This shift of focus from the

³⁴ Elisha Goldstein, *Uncovering Happiness: Overcoming Depression with Mindfulness and Self-Compassion* (New York: Atria Books, 2015), 92-93.

³⁵ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 76.

³⁶ Ibid., 77.

external to the internal would be beneficial to reducing adolescent anxiety about appearance. Rather than focusing on shortcomings, it allows individuals to focus on what is working well in the body: breath, movement, blood flow, and more. This instills self-confidence in oneself and decreases overall anxiety.

2.3 Taking the Next Steps: Applying Mindfulness

The goal of this thesis/project has three parts. First, I want to show other teachers, pastors, youth directors, lay ministers, and professionals that there is a role for mindfulness in the lives of high school aged youth. Establishing the importance of the entire system is key, because it encourages a reframing of the mind away from always working on a “to do list” and toward the cultivation of self-awareness. Mindfulness does not promise to bring about a cure for a disease, but it does show that “it is possible for us to *heal* ourselves—to learn to live with and work with the conditions that present themselves in the present moment.”³⁷ Whereas there are several techniques involved in MBSR and other similar mindfulness programs, what is clear is that it is useful as a reframing mindset but not if it is simply viewed as a means to an end. Meditation isn’t an all or nothing commitment, and there is no end-point where one gets graded or ranked. It is a process or journey, not an ending or a destination. Benefits exist at every level of the process: even “mindful minutes” at the beginning of group activities have proved successful. Before each mindfulness exercise one does with youth, frame the exercise as a gift to them, reminding them that time together is a gift. In one example, I tell them

³⁷ Ibid., 200.

that for the next few minutes, the only thing that is required of them is to breathe in and breathe out. The stress relief that comes from that phrase alone is palpable. It is essential that meditation is recognized as a way of developing self-awareness and agency—it is conscious commitment to the self and to overall wellness, something that is repeatedly practiced, “not a set of techniques for healing [since] healing comes out of the practice itself when it is engaged in *as a way of being*. Meditation is much less likely to be healing if you are using it as a way of getting somewhere, even to wholeness. From this perspective, you already are whole, so what is the point of trying to become what you already are?”³⁸ Establishing the meaning in mindfulness as a process for young people when you engage them with the practice is vital, and I want to emphasize the importance of the process for my readers as well.

The second goal of this thesis/project is showing that mindfulness can have positive measurable results. It seems contrary to the first notion, but I recognize that in American culture, whether one is a teacher, doctor, pastor, business manager, or something else, success depends on outcomes. Even as I recognize the importance of mindfulness as a process, I also know that groups will not adopt the practice unless positive outcomes can be established. Many churches have a deep-rooted and rigorous commitment to a “doing mind” mentality, and for good reason: they are focused on examples from the Bible and from the historical Christian value of serving others and the tasks and actions they can carry out in the community around them. How many times do parishioners and youth feel the pull to do *more* in the church? Church members, young

³⁸ Ibid., 197.

and old, are often pulled in many directions when deciding how to best serve others, and they want to see results: people fed, houses built, and church attendance increasing. As a teacher, I know that in many states, including Massachusetts, one method of a teacher's evaluation is based on the standardized test scores of his or her students; another method of evaluation is on the achievement of a statistically measurable goal approved in writing by the district. Switching from the mentality of the "doing mind" to the "being mind" that is so prevalent in American culture is a challenge.

Despite the fact that the benefits of mindfulness aren't always easy to measure statistically, many recent studies indicate the various ways that it is successful. These measures can be used to help persuade those who are reluctant to see the benefits of mindfulness programs. Some success measures, such as attentiveness, reduction of anxiety, and increased levels of compassion will be explained in the following chapters. As I mentioned in the introduction, although many organizations have found success in establishing mindfulness programs for leaders, the focus of this thesis/project is on developing the agency and overall wellness of adolescents, not on the benefits for teachers, church leaders, pastors, or administrators. Of course, a systemic approach to mindfulness would be ideal, and since strategies would need to be modeled for pastors, church leaders, and youth directors before they practiced them with adolescents, leaders would have to participate in some mindfulness programs and trainings as well. Although the focus of this thesis/project is on adolescents primarily, not on staff, the positive

benefit of these practices on church leaders would be helpful to their own wellness in addition to the wellness of the young people they minister to.³⁹

My third goal is to give mindfulness strategies to church leaders that can be applied in whole or in part to different settings. From things like a “mindful minute” strategy to more involved techniques like full body scans or yoga, I want to show youth directors and pastors how the successful methods from clinical, medical settings can be applied in church settings with youth. Even as I recognize that programs often rely on Buddhist techniques and may have to include ways of introducing the topic to parents or guardians, I will explain how the potential benefits outweigh the downsides. A mindful youth group might mean a different approach to service work since time together would be less focused on “doing” and more focused on “being”. Since mindfulness activities can’t be “measured” in a traditional way, the benefits might be harder to recognize. Trained youth leaders would be able to help adolescents make connections between the activities and the benefits as they begin to engage in mindful practices.

One additional benefit of mindfulness activities is that they might be more attractive to millennials who see themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” and outreach activities that include those outside the church may be more successful. I will provide methods that can be applied to different ages of adolescents and varied ability levels, although my experience and focus resides primarily with high school youth. Given that

³⁹ Although few wide-ranging studies of the impact of mindfulness on teachers or church leaders exist, one upcoming book promises to provide a comprehensive examination: *Happy Teachers Change the World: A Guide for Cultivating Mindfulness in Education*, by Thich Nhat Hanh and Katherine Weare. The book is unavailable at present and will be released on June 6, 2017. Although not enough research has been done to prove the efficacy or legitimacy of mindfulness programs in public schools, I look forward to continuing to research this trend to see if it proves successful.

resources in different churches vary, I will also provide methods that do not place a financial or resource-oriented burden on a youth group. One of the best things about mindfulness is that anyone can facilitate it and anyone can practice it: the key resources needed are within the self. Lastly, I will provide methods that allow for various levels of time commitment. I know that some youth workers will want to dive headfirst into this program, while others will simply want to test the waters. My plan allows for different entry points so that leaders reading this can commit to the level that they think will work best in their own settings. It is my sincere hope that church leaders of all types, lay ministers, youth directors, and ordained pastors, can find useful strategies to help improve the lives of the young people that they care for, minister to, and love. Helping this next generation to “calm the chaos” is vital to their wellness, health, and future well-being.

Chapter 3

Mindfulness and Adolescent Well-being

“Breath is the bridge which connects life to consciousness, which unites your body to your thoughts. Whenever your mind becomes scattered, use your breath as the means to take hold of your mind again.”—Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*

“Meditation brings wisdom; lack of meditation leaves ignorance. Know well what leads you forward and what holds you back, and choose the path that leads to wisdom.”
—Buddha

“No pain, no gain”... “We’re A-sians, not B-sians”... “My parents said a B is like an F in our house”... “I need better SAT scores”... “I can’t get into a nursing program with B’s on my transcript”... “I was up all night studying”... In many ways, for adolescents the primary measure of success and learning is often their high school transcript. Teachers in classrooms all over America hear the question “is this going to be graded?” on an almost daily basis. Students and parents prioritize academic success and see it as tremendously important to future achievement. I argue that even though grades are one measure of learning, they are not the only or even the primary measure of success that adolescents, parents, pastors, teachers, or administrators should rely on. We need to redirect the conversation away from success measured in numbers, letters, and scores, and toward success measured in spiritual or vocational fulfillment. From the perspective and social location of many high school students, grades are one of the most stressful aspects of their young adulthood. Indeed, stress that previously was most prevalent among high school aged youth has now trickled down to impact middle school students and even those in elementary school. This may be because standardized testing is now taking place at younger grade levels and with greater frequency. It could also be because

students are segregated into ability levels at younger ages, or it could be because of a variety of other factors. What we do know for sure is that “There is a constant push for children to achieve at academic skills earlier, and so school becomes a big source of stress in their lives.”⁴⁰ Children—and parents—measure their performance against that of others to make sure they aren’t “falling behind” because of both the perceived and real impact that grades will have on high school course selection, high school dropout rates, college admission, and college completion rates.

Grading is also a substantial source of stress for teachers. Grading is often seen as an adversarial process where a teacher single-handedly decides how much learning has happened and the student is given little opportunity to respond. In an ideal classroom, grading would be a two-sided process where students and teachers could evaluate together how much a student has learned in the course of any given activity and choose the best way to demonstrate that learning. A two-way process would work to eliminate anxiety as well as increase student engagement in the process. Revamping the grading system in our country is an extraordinary goal, and some schools are working toward this goal or eliminating things like class rank and GPA altogether. However, I recognize that most teachers, myself included, work in a school system where traditional numeric grading is the norm. Even as the current grading system is imperfect, I also acknowledge that it is not going anywhere right now. The methods I describe in this thesis/project are applicable in a variety of settings, and the success measures that I indicate will be measurable in those traditional settings. Currently, grading is a principal source of stress

⁴⁰ Linda Lantieri, *Building Emotional Intelligence*, 11.

for students and has a major impact on whether or where they attend college. Despite the fact that there are currently no full-scale studies that equate mindfulness with increased GPA or SAT scores, there are ways that the skills that mindfulness helps develop can be applied to student success that go beyond but also include increased academic performance. One key component of my thesis/project is to demonstrate the ways that a program of mindfulness integrated into a church youth group setting can have measurable positive results on the academic lives of students, including but not limited to increased academic performance in traditional school settings (public, private, or home schooling). Helping young people from our churches succeed in their academic programs will give them self-confidence and it will also help them see the value of participation in youth programs as the programs adapt to help them succeed in their academic endeavors.

With the above parameters in mind, I want to establish how mindfulness can help reduce the stress adolescents experience when it comes to the issue of grading in two ways: first, it can help students by relieving the general stress associated with the overtaxation of school, family life, work, and the “chaos” of life that was discussed in the first chapter. This will be more specifically addressed later in this chapter as well. Teachers know that students often shut down when they are faced with more than they think they can handle: some stop participating in discussion, some stop doing work, and some stop attending class altogether to avoid the stress. If students can develop self-agency through mindfulness, it can put them back in the driver’s seat of their own lives. They can obtain the means to deflate the escalation of strong emotions related to the chaos that they are confronted with and learn to cope. If those of us who work with

adolescents understand that students are overworked, helping to provide opportunities for inner quietude will reduce stress levels overall. Indeed, mindfulness isn't just about *feeling* less stressed. It impacts us at the biological level. Meditation is associated with reduced levels of cortisol, the stress-producing hormone in the body. Our young people won't just feel less stressed, they will actually *be* less stressed.

A second way that mindfulness leads to academic achievement is by increasing a student's ability to focus. Students will develop the power and agency to choose what they will shift their focus and attention to. The attentional training that is one benefit of mindfulness will improve student outcomes on assignments, tests, and projects. In fact, "Since meditation can be thought of as a kind of mental training of attention...meditation could have a significant impact on performance requiring attentional abilities... Attention seems to be a flexible, trainable skill."⁴¹ In other words, because mindfulness increases overall focus, that learned focus can be applied to other areas of a student's life, such as studying. In youth group activities, leaders might encourage students to focus on a particular passage of scripture, a particular aspect of the self, or a particular sound. The focus they learn from those activities can then be applied to their academic endeavors in the classroom. Recall the difference explained in chapter 2 of the doing versus being mindset. If we can train students to develop the being mindset and focus on something like breath or sound in a meditation exercise, they can then apply that focus when they sit down to study chemistry or read a novel for English class. Kirke Olson in *The Invisible Classroom* asks us to imagine the idea of attention control as walking in the dark with a

⁴¹ Ibid., 14.

flashlight. On the one hand, the person holding the light is in control of what to focus on, which “aspects of the environment to illuminate and which to ignore.”⁴² She categorizes this kind of attentiveness focus “top down attentional control.” On the other hand, “bottom up attentional control” is a response to outside influences: a bat flying across the sky, for example, or a car speeding past. Students are easily and frequently guilty of being distracted by this bottom up attentional control: someone walking by the classroom, a car’s music driving through the parking lot outside, or a flickering of the lights are all outside distractions with the power to sideline a lesson. However, using the attentional control modeled in mindfulness activities, a teacher or student might say, “I notice that car was playing a Justin Timberlake song. How interesting. Now let’s get back to reading Faulkner.” The trainable skill of returning to the task at hand without judging the momentary distraction can lead to greater academic achievement in the classroom.

A third way that mindfulness leads to academic accomplishment is to help students shift away from a “product based” model for learning and toward a “process based” model. Mindfulness isn’t something that can necessarily go on a transcript or resume. It’s not something that teachers can grade in a traditional sense. Students who think about only the end result—getting an “A” for example, or being allowed to partake in the sacrament of a public confirmation ceremony or bar mitzvah—are going to be challenged to invest in mindfulness in a way that is different than they might traditionally invest in schoolwork or other activities. Although process based ratings would be a

⁴² Kirke Olson, *The Invisible Classroom: Relationships, Neuroscience, and Mindfulness in School* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014), 91.

remarkable way to evaluate student achievement in all academic areas, most schools aren't ready to change their grading system entirely. Youth programs in church settings have the flexibility to avoid the issue of grading and invest in a process-oriented course of action like mindfulness. In this way, the church can become a model for adolescents about the importance of process over product even as they are often graded on final products or tests in traditional school settings.⁴³

The fourth way that mindfulness leads to more achievement in learning is to engage students to think about how what they are studying can be a means to finding their place in the larger society around them. This will be discussed in depth in the concluding chapter of my thesis/project, which will tie mindfulness to vocational discernment and show the direct link between how mindfulness based meditation can help adolescents find a greater purpose in their own lives. We know that mindfulness and "Giving children a regular time to be in stillness can do much to help them make a safe passage from childhood to adulthood. When children are taught to appreciate silence and slow down, they have the rare opportunity to explore the deeper questions of life, such as 'What is my unique purpose?' or 'How can I best make use of my talents and gifts?'"⁴⁴ This, to me, is a much greater indicator of whether a student has developed and met learning goals than improvement on standardized test scores, increased SAT scores, higher GPAs, or any other one-size-fits-all measure of student achievement. If church leaders can provide adolescents with opportunities to see how their academic interests

⁴³ In fact, there is some current research that suggests replacing product oriented grading with process oriented grading is better for student learning and improvement. For grades to be meaningful to individual students, best practices indicate that a combination of product, process, and progress oriented grading is essential.

⁴⁴ Linda Lantieri, *Building Emotional Intelligence*, 136.

and talents can fulfill the needs of larger society, then we can call our programs truly beneficial. Parker Palmer tells us that, “Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.”⁴⁵ Mindfulness is one way that church workers can encourage adolescents to begin to learn how to listen to that inner voice telling them who they might become and unfolding the process that entails.

3.1 Apathy: Mindfulness and Student Engagement

Even though some students are overly concerned with academics, another challenge in the classroom and outside of it for teachers is student apathy. Among students, apathy can be the result of a variety of factors. First, some students are apathetic because they fail to see practical applications to classroom learning. This aspect of student apathy will be covered in detail in the concluding chapter of this thesis/project where vocational discernment is linked to mindfulness. Second, some students appear to be apathetic because of the emotional stress they are under by factors outside of the classroom. Some aspects of this issue will be covered in the section on student anxiety and emotional intelligence. A third reason for student apathy in this section is that students don’t see themselves in the lessons. The lessons learned through mindfulness and the ability to self-focus can help combat adolescent apathy.

There are many factors that help decrease student apathy and increase learning in the classroom, from parental involvement to strong social networks to participation on athletic teams. Another factor that contributes to student personal self-awareness that is

⁴⁵ Parker J Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2000).

often overlooked by mainstream academia is spirituality and religion. Many published studies indicate a causal relationship between high levels of church involvement among particular denominational or ethnic groups and student accomplishment in learning. For example, religion and spirituality was seen as a contributing factor to success among Latina/o students along with supportive family members, cultural values (known as “familismo”), social support, and other factors.⁴⁶ Additionally, religiosity and spirituality have been associated with favorable learning outcomes among urban student populations, particularly African American youth, in numerous studies as well.⁴⁷ These studies indicate higher levels of academic engagement and reduced levels of apathy among youth who are spiritual or religious, including how students’ connections to and support from spiritual communities was a contributing factor to their academic achievement. Since research already indicates a causal relationship between spirituality and academic accomplishment, I argue that we can capitalize on that effect in order to help students bring their academic learning back into their understanding of faith to help establish meaning for what they are studying in classrooms.

In my experience piloting mindfulness programs with adolescents, the sheer novelty of the practice was engaging for them. For most young people I work with, my mindfulness program has been their first introduction to any type of meditation. I know from experience that participants are talking to one another about the meditation activities I have done with them, and young people not in my particular group have asked me about

⁴⁶ Melissa L. Morgan Consoli, “Predictors of Resilience and Thriving among Latina/o Undergraduate Students,” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 37, no. 3 (August 2015): 304-318, accessed May 2, 2017.

⁴⁷ Nicole E. Holland, “Partnering with a Higher Power: Academic Engagement, Religiosity, and Spirituality of African American Urban Youth,” *Education and Urban Society* 48, no. 4 (May 2016): 299-323, accessed May 2, 2017.

them. As a high school teacher, I know that if students are talking about an activity with their friends, it's usually a good indicator that something interesting is happening.

Although sometimes it seems more natural to work mindfulness activities into one particular religious context, I argue that the activities I suggest would also be appropriate for community service groups, interfaith groups, and other private groups of students who have come together with a shared set of goals or values. The concepts and benefits of mindfulness are transferable to multiple settings and should not be limited to any one denominational or church group.

Students who feel distant from the curriculum in their high schools are often disengaged because they fail to see how what they are doing in school relates to them personally. Students participating in a faith or service-based group outside of school have already come together with a shared set of values. What mindfulness can do is help direct their behavior in order to make clear the links between ideas of charity, which is a response to injustice in the world, and advocacy or justice, which addresses the root causes of the inequalities in our society.⁴⁸ One goal of mindfulness is to help clarify the link between the self and others, giving context to the larger structural issues that cause suffering and remembering that suffering itself has its roots in attachment, according to the Buddhist philosophy that underscores the practice of mindfulness. Through

⁴⁸ This thought brings me back to my first field education placement. My job, working at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter through the Phillips Brooks House at Harvard University, was to work with the undergraduate student volunteers to help them bridge the gap between the economic and educational privilege in their own lives and the economic injustice encountered in the lives of the homeless population in the shelter. The task was challenging, but it set me on a path in working with youth to forge understanding of service as a goal, not just service itself. This lesson resonates with me today as I continue to run a community service group at the high school where I teach.

mindfulness, students can begin the process of linking their lives to the things they are studying in school or to the activities they do outside of school.

In addition, mindfulness encourages self-engagement. Although much of what we traditionally direct adolescents to do is “me-centered”, it is not “me-centered” in a way that encourages depth of thought or individual engagement with the self. It is astonishing that in a society where the “self” is in some ways so central to behavioral patterns, as it is among American adolescents, that the concept of mindfulness has not quickly become more mainstream. In a society where the average millennial will take over 25,000 selfies in his or her lifetime, the focus on the self needs a major shift in perspective. So much of our construction of self is focused on outward appearances that students often fail to get to know their inner selves. When much of students’ self-esteem is centered around their physical appearance, they inevitably become discouraged when they fail to live up to impossible social norms. This is where mindfulness can become a significant tool for adolescent growth. Mindfulness encourages a self-focus without encouraging selfishness or “me-ism”. By inviting students to focus on the self, student engagement increases. In addition, if we again show consideration for the Buddhist roots of mindfulness, we might also acknowledge that this discouragement of “me-ism” is another method of achieving freedom from attachment, which is the root cause of suffering.

Often, students who lack engagement act out in ways that require school behavioral supports or disciplinary interventions. Despite the fact that acting out can be the result of a variety of factors, I argue that one key factor is that it is because students

feel disinterested in the prescribed curriculum. In fact, “When children... grow up in homes and schools that welcome the exploration of their inner lives, they are more likely to develop a healthy identity filled with love, hope, and optimism”⁴⁹ and less likely to act out. In addition, they may be acting out because of unmanaged stress levels due to factors beyond the schools control. This can make the student teacher relationship an adversarial one, since “We often mistake the symptoms of unmanaged stress in our children as inappropriate behavior that needs to be stopped. Children are reprimanded by teachers and parents for actions that are really stress reactions, rather than intentional misbehavior. The situation becomes a downward spiral of one stress reaction after another, and both adult and child are caught in it.”⁵⁰ I argue that engaging adolescents with mindfulness in programs *outside* of school can help encourage active participation by individual students *in* school and result in increased engagement. Mindfulness doesn’t go on a resume, but it can certainly help students think through the other things that do.

3.2 Anxiety and Depression: Mindfulness, Emotional Intelligence, and Self-awareness

In many ways, the idea of mindfulness is counter-cultural. We live in a loud and fast-paced society. It seems like no matter where we look, everyone is in a rush to get somewhere. We live in a society where multi-tasking is not just encouraged but also necessary. Without multi-tasking, adolescents would not be able to complete the

⁴⁹ Linda Lantieri, *Building Emotional Intelligence*, 137.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 11.

requirements laid out for them. Students are expected to excel academically, participate in sports, volunteer on the weekends, hold down a job to save for college, maintain healthy family relationships, and more, all while balancing a social life. Recently,

“A poll conducted by the National Kids Poll surveyed 875 children, ages nine through thirteen, about what caused them stress and what coping strategies they used the most to deal with the stress in their lives. The top three sources of stress that they reported were grades, school, and homework (36 percent); family (32 percent); and friends, peers, gossip, and teasing (21 percent). The top three coping strategies were to play or do something active (52 percent); to listen to music (44 percent); and to watch TV or play a video game (42 percent). Of the ten coping strategies that were chosen the most, not one involved going within or being contemplative.”⁵¹

This bevy of demands can take a toll on the social and emotional well being of adolescents, and church leaders need to be able to facilitate giving them more strategies to cope with all of these demands. Even though young people can seek excellence without being forced to be everything to everyone, the pressure that they feel to excel can be very taxing.

Society at large tells adolescents they have to do “all of the above” to get into college, but this leaves our young people feeling like they are spread too thin. In my experience as a high school teacher, I have often had students tell me that they don’t have time to pursue the things they love to do because they have to focus on resume building for college. I’ve had students interested in dance who were told by guidance counselors that they needed to be on a school-based team instead. I’ve had students who stuck with a sport they didn’t love because of the need to be on a team for 4 years, demonstrating “commitment” on a college resume. The idea of “trying on” isn’t always encouraged for

⁵¹ Ibid., 12.

high school students because, according to them, it means they are not committed. As the advisor of a high school community service club, I certainly get a fair number of kids who are in it just to be able to fill in the “community service” section on their resumes. Even as it disappoints me in some ways, I also feel that there is value in the service they do because I hope it inspires a change in the students. Engaging these students in conversations to help them reflect on the service they do and make connections to possible career choices has been one of the best parts of my teaching career. To me, there is a change that happens in people when they perform service, so no matter what the motive, I think it can be beneficial. Personally, my need to serve others comes from a deep-seated spiritual commitment to justice and the understanding of my own theological beliefs, but I recognize that students volunteer for a multitude of distinct reasons. On the other side of things, however, I sometimes see students with a profound desire to serve those around them, but who don’t spend as much time engaged in volunteer work because they are too stressed out about schoolwork—taking honors and AP classes is key—or because there is a pressing need to diversify their resumes. In one student’s words, “community service doesn’t have a varsity team.” It’s sad to me that students are driven away from what they love to do because they feel like they need to build a resume. This is another area where I think faith-based youth programs can help students see the value in service work that helps them develop a sense of vocation that works in conjunction with the academic work they do in the classroom. In this way, the things they participate in can work together to serve a greater purpose, not just to go on a

resume. This will be discussed in greater depth in the concluding chapter of my thesis/project.

There are several ways that mindfulness can help improve the social and emotional well-being of students as they are torn in so many diverse directions. The first and most obvious key way is that it reduces overall stress and anxiety. As we saw in the second chapter, mindfulness works in multiple ways to improve overall health. If we can retrain our minds and bodies to respond differently to stress in controlled environments, we can then replicate that response in non-controlled environments. For example, a natural stress reaction might be a tightening of muscles, shaking of the hands, and a quickening of the breath. A trained mindfulness response would be the intentional slowing down and noticing of the breath, a relaxation of the neck and back muscles, and a grounding of one's feet.⁵² Because our brains are trainable organs, we can practice the response to stress that we desire and make it into a habit. By developing coping strategies through the practice of mindfulness, individuals are more in self-possession of their bodies and minds in stress inducing situations and therefore able to gain emotional equilibrium. This feeling of balance is another key way to improve the social and emotional well being of adolescents.

The benefits of mindfulness for anxiety reduction have been shown through a variety of long-term studies. In fact, it was one of the first medical conditions for which Kabat-Zinn's MBSR program proved effective. The benefits were medically and objectively documented, and included changes in blood pressure, reduction in adrenaline,

⁵² Sarah Silverton, *The Mindfulness Breakthrough*, 107.

and stabilization of irregular heart rates.⁵³ In a long-term study conducted at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Kabat-Zinn and several other collaborating doctors found that, “both anxiety and depression dropped markedly in virtually every person in the study [and] so did the frequency and severity of their panic attacks.”⁵⁴ In addition, many patients reported continuing to practice the techniques years after the study had taken place. It is clear that mindfulness had a long lasting positive impact on the individuals in the study.

A second way that mindfulness can improve the emotional well being of adolescents is that it can help them learn to self-regulate emotions. This is related to but not that same as the idea of resiliency discussed in the next section. Helping adolescents develop emotional balance in their own lives is a key way that we can facilitate favorable goals outside of the academic realm. Studies show that

“children who are able to self-reflect and calm themselves are more capable of recognizing, identifying, and managing their emotions. They can also concentrate and think more clearly. Distress is less likely to spill over into antisocial behavior. Children are then able to bring their full attention, enthusiasm, interest, and positive emotional response to any situation. As a result, their full potential can be reached.”⁵⁵

As discussed in the second chapter, mindfulness activities take practice, and these actions are as much about the process as they are about the results. Just as we can train our attentional abilities through mindfulness, we can train our ability to self-regulate our emotions. This is in part a result of biology and the neuroplasticity of the brain. What this means is that once pathways in the brain are established during meditation, they

⁵³ Stephen McKenzie and Craig Hassed, *Mindfulness for Life* (Wollombi, Australia: Exisle Publishing, 2012), 83.

⁵⁴ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 336.

⁵⁵ Linda Lantieri, *Building Emotional Intelligence*, 137.

become more likely to be used at other times much the same way that a beaten path in the woods becomes more likely to be used. In this way,

“When children notice the flow of their feelings, thoughts, or sensations while they are experiencing one of these calming practices, they are developing the ability to use that awareness at any time in their lives. When they get upset and are not sure what is happening for them, they may first be able to use one of these practices to begin to gain control of their emotions and calm themselves down. It is a lot easier for children to talk about what they are upset about when they are able to get out of the “stress response” mode. If they are able to notice where in their bodies they feel this upset, they can use their minds to let go of it enough to be able to talk about it and even think of some ways they might solve the situation or feel better about it.”⁵⁶

Both youth workers and teachers can be educated in the art of de-escalation. For example, in the state mandated restraint training that all teachers in Massachusetts complete, we are given a variety of strategies for helping to deescalate students who are experiencing stress responses and are likely to act out negatively. Although I’m not advocating that the state eliminate that training in any way, I am advocating that children and youth who participate in mindfulness programs are less likely to require intervention or restraint at all. Educators will be much more successful in their efforts if students are trained in the art of managing their own emotions. Although a lot of this education can start at home, organized mindfulness programs or activities can help fill in the gaps where young people are lacking. This is yet another key way that mindfulness can have a lasting positive impact on adolescents.

A third way that mindfulness can help adolescents develop emotional well being is that it gives them tools to be able to combat depression. While nothing can “cure”

⁵⁶ Linda Lantieri, *Building Emotional Intelligence*, 137.

depression on its own, giving young people different coping strategies is beneficial. Depression is a substantial problem among millennials and among the population in general. It has been described as the “common cold of psychopathology” and it is “overtaking heart disease as the developed world’s most destructive disease.”⁵⁷ The kindness and appreciation of self that is inherent in the very idea of mindfulness can intuitively be linked to reduction in depression, but there are also specific techniques that can be used. According to noted Harvard mindfulness researcher Ellen Langer, “the opposite of mindfulness—mindlessness—causes *most* of the world’s problems, including depression” which is in line with other great thinkers such as the Buddha, Plato, the Dalai Lama, Henry David Thoreau, and countless others.⁵⁸ If mindlessness is the cause of depression,⁵⁹ even in part, it makes sense that its opposite—mindfulness—can be used to combat it. Mindfulness alone can help with milder forms of depression, but it can also work in conjunction with other solutions for more serious cases of depression. On the one hand, “Mindfulness therapies and practices may well offer depressed and potentially depressed people (that is, all of us) all the benefits that other theories and treatments do, such as improving our thinking process and even our neurotransmitter levels.”⁶⁰ On the other hand, it also seems that one of the benefits of mindfulness is possible depression prevention. It seems that switching from the default “doing mode” to a more conscious “being mode” can be an enormous factor in reducing the probability of depression.

⁵⁷ Stephen McKenzie and Craig Hassed, *Mindfulness for Life*, 89, 90.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 98-99.

⁵⁹ Noted Harvard mindfulness researcher Ellen Langer calls depression an “extreme form of mindlessness.” Although this might overstate the case, the unintentional unhooking from the present moment that is part of mindlessness is certainly not ideal.

⁶⁰ Stephen McKenzie and Craig Hassed, *Mindfulness for Life*, 101.

Although depression is one of the largest psychological problems that our young people face, it is by no means the only one. The number of referrals I see in students for mental health disorders is higher than I saw even 15 years ago when I was living as a resident proctor among college freshmen. Even though some might argue that it is simply a higher awareness of disorders, there is evidence that there is a higher occurrence as well. In fact, “it is estimated that one out of five nine- to seventeen-year-olds has a diagnosable mental disorder. The fact is that an increasing number of children are entering schools in crisis, unprepared cognitively and emotionally to learn. At the same time, educators confront the challenge of higher public expectations while dealing with diminishing internal resources to do their jobs well.”⁶¹ I argue that mindfulness can help young people develop the tools to be aware of their own physical and emotional stress factors in order to address the problems without medical intervention. I am also aware that for some people, medication is an essential tool to overcoming depression, but I argue that it is often overused. In fact,

“The severity of unmanaged stress in our society is evident. It is estimated that 70 to 90 percent of all doctor visits in the United States today are for stress-related disorders. In a ten-year study, people who were unable to manage stress effectively were shown to have a death rate 40 percent higher than that of nonstressed individuals. Our society is bent on quick fixes when life challenges come our way. We medicate ourselves and our children. Americans consume five billion tranquilizers every year in an effort to control their stress.”⁶²

I have seen many instances, both in my own personal experience and in the relevant literature, where medication was suggested prior to or in lieu of cognitive therapy. I

⁶¹ Linda Lantieri, *Building Emotional Intelligence*, 11.

⁶² Linda Ibid.

argue that when combined with other methods, mindfulness can even be a tool to help people avoid prescriptions on their way to wellness. As we shift to the next section, I will show how mindfulness can be a key tool for self-reliance and resiliency as well, which are other tools that can be used to reduce anxiety and depression.

3.3 Resiliency: Mindfulness and Self-reliance

One of the key aspects of Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness based stress relief (MBSR) program is that it gives patients agency on their own path to physical wellness. If the development of self-reliance is a key factor in patient wellness when it comes to the curing of physical ailments, it follows that the development of self-reliance is a crucial factor for the curing of psychological ailments. Mindfulness helps adolescents engage in empowerment and self-transformation. One of the most important twenty-first century skills we can teach our young people is how to use the tools they already possess to effect change in themselves and the world around them. In fact, this will relate to the idea of vocation I address that is one key goal to the introduction of mindfulness to young people.

Resiliency is defined as the ability to recover from difficulties, or “the innate ability we all have to self-correct and thrive in the face of life’s challenges”⁶³, and it often involves developing coping strategies for dealing with stress and anxiety. Resiliency programs exist for patients in hospitals, for veterans in the military, for employees in corporate settings, and for students in public schools. They exist to help people who

⁶³ Ibid., 13.

might otherwise fall through the cracks. Traditional education systems arguably cater to more conventional students and learning styles while creating a great deal of scaffolding for students who qualify for special education services through vehicles such as an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 (a legal document that exists to protect a student with a documented physical or mental impairment that limits their ability to learn in a school environment). Resiliency programs⁶⁴ often exist as well to help students who don't fit into either of the aforementioned categories: students who are unsuccessful in their classes but don't qualify for individualized services. Currently, "Bonnie Bernard, a pioneer in the field of strength-based approaches, has helped us take a look at how young people's strengths and capabilities can be developed in order to protect them from the potential harm that these circumstances represent."⁶⁵ I claim that mindfulness outside of schools, when combined with other strategies in schools, can be a key factor in developing resiliency as a means to more favorable learning outcomes and academic achievement.

The resiliency that develops from mindfulness training is tough to measure, and yet researchers know that the self-efficacy that develops gives patients a feeling of control over otherwise uncontrollable situations. Kabat-Zinn contends that self-efficacy, "reflects confidence in... your ability to make things happen" and evidence shows that "a strong sense of self-efficacy is the best and most consistent predictor of positive health

⁶⁴ The resiliency program at the high school where I currently work fits into the definition as I have described. We refer freshmen to the program when they are unsuccessful academically, socially, or emotionally. Students are then placed into a group where they meet almost daily with one teacher who mentors them and helps them navigate the system of high school to find success. "Resiliency" is treated as an academic class and students receive credit for participation as they would any other class, so it's not something extra they have to do, but something that is prioritized in their schedule.

⁶⁵ Linda Lantieri, *Building Emotional Intelligence*, 13.

outcomes in many different medical situations.”⁶⁶ Adolescents can use that skill in other areas as they navigate the pathway through schools, work in community service, and beyond into the workforce, military, or college. It is my hope that the resiliency they develop can be a lasting gift they use for the rest of their lives.

3.4 Overall Health: Mindfulness and the Body

One major way that religious organizations can assist young people is in helping them to develop a healthy balance between work, family, and social life because schools fall short in addressing this problem. Even as many jobs that adults have in our society now routinely require that work be brought home, most adults would not choose a job where they work for 40 hours and then bring home an additional 3-4 hours of work per night. It leaves little time for family, self-care, and relaxation. Yet that’s exactly what many young people are facing. In a recent article published by CNN, researchers found that “some students are doing more than three hours of homework a night—and that all that school work may literally be making them sick.”⁶⁷ In view of the fact that three hours was the average amount of homework students reported having, it must be noted that some students were doing significantly more than three hours of homework, too. With homework starting as early as kindergarten—25 minutes per night on average according to the same CNN article⁶⁸—the reality is that many high school students work

⁶⁶ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 201.

⁶⁷ Amanda Enayati, “Is Homework Making Your Child Sick?” CNN (March 21, 2014), accessed April 1, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/21/health/homework-stress/>.

⁶⁸ Even though the National Education Association does not recommend homework in kindergarten, many schools do assign it, including the wonderful public school that my own son attends.

more hours per week on homework than the adults in this country do on work outside of their normal workday. Our kids are out of balance.

Researchers know from medical studies that mindfulness can have an impact on patients dealing with different physical diseases such as cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, and cardiovascular diseases. However, the physical benefits of mindfulness are not just apparent in people who are already sick. Mindfulness contributes to physical well-being in the general population, too. Even in those who are not diagnosed with any physical or psychological illness, “Stressful life experiences can influence the activity of the immune system, which is known to play a critical role in the body’s defense mechanisms against cancer and infection.”⁶⁹ Mindfulness can help us be well, feel well, and stay well. Specific research exists that supports this claim: “Drs. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and Ron Glaser of Ohio State University College of Medicine showed that the natural killer (NK) cell activity of medical students clearly went down and then back up as a function of how much stress they were under. During exam periods, NK activity and other immune functions were diminished compared to levels when the students did not have exams.”⁷⁰ If we can use mindfulness to improve our own immune systems, we can better balance our overall physical health. Mindfulness has also been successfully used to help those trying to improve their overall health through weight loss, and it has even been used as a tool to help individuals quit smoking. Mindfulness is a largely untapped resource for physical health and wellness.

⁶⁹ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 202.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 202.

I hope this chapter has made clear the connections between mindfulness and greater adolescent academic achievement in schools. The way that mindfulness helps ameliorate stress and anxiety to assist in students improving attention and focus at school was one instrument for students to achieve favorable learning outcomes. Increasing adolescent engagement with academics and course content was another connection. The long-established track record that mindfulness has in helping adolescents combat depression and anxiety is an enormous confirmation of how mindfulness can help students achieve a greater degree of learning. Giving young people ways to establish habits of self-reliance was a key way to help generate student self-confidence as well. All of these factors will allow students to be in greater self-possession in the classroom and beyond: the development of agency that is the result of mindful engagement with the self is a key factor for the vocational discernment that will be discussed in chapter 5. It is clear that mindfulness is a significant technique for establishing better physical and emotional health for adolescents. In the next chapter, I will provide youth directors and pastors with strategies and lessons to apply mindfulness when working with millennials.

Chapter 4

Clearing the Clutter in the Church: Connecting with Youth in Church Contexts

“Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic self-hood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we ought to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks—we will also find our path of authentic service in the world.” –Parker Palmer

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” –Jeremiah 29:11, NRSV

The most important thing we must remember when working with the youth in our congregations is that *we* don’t call them into their vocation: Christ calls them. As pastors, youth directors, and lay ministers can only help facilitate that call. According to the Gospel of John, the first words that Jesus spoke to the disciples were, “What are you looking for?” (John 1:38, NRSV). This simple question started the disciples on their journey of following Christ, fulfilling their lifelong mission to find and follow the Messiah. The disciples found joy and contentment in their calling. The disciples were searching for meaning in their lives but needed someone to direct their passion. Notice that Jesus didn’t say, “Are you looking for me?” and he didn’t say “Are you looking for the Messiah?” He didn’t ask a question that already implied an answer. As a journalism teacher, one of the lessons I instill in my students is the ability to ask open-ended questions. Questions that are open-ended invite discussion, reflection, and dialogue. In the same way, we as parents, pastors, youth workers, and mentors must engage in activities and programs that invite discussion with the young people we work with, helping them to discover their calling. As Thomas Merton puts it, “Every man [sic] has a vocation to be someone: but he must understand clearly that in order to fulfill this

vocation he can only be one person: himself.”⁷¹ The self-exploration that mindfulness employs encourages reflexive thinking and an exploration of hitherto unconscious thought whereupon adolescents can contemplate what their calling is and the way they live out their vocations in life.

Now that we have seen the value in the mindfulness process and the various ways that mindfulness contributes to adolescent well-being academically and emotionally, it is time to examine what these programs can look like in church settings. I have worked with enough young people on mindfulness to know what kinds of activities work best, and it is my goal to show readers the multitude of ways that they can integrate it into existing programs. By using these strategies in whole or in part, you can begin the journey of mindfulness together, resulting in more authentic self-knowledge that can lead to more authentic relationships, experiences, and faith communities. Always remembering that the goal is twofold—helping students succeed on an emotional, social, and academic level and helping them discern vocation—we can work with them to meet their needs as they explore the abundant ways that God is calling them into service.

The methods I introduce in this section consider a variety of learning styles in order to reach adolescents with various strengths and approaches to education. For example, some of the activities are more geared toward auditory learners, some geared toward visual learners, some toward linguistic, and some toward kinesthetic learners. At the same time as it is important for teenagers to be exposed to different styles of learning, my experience as a teacher has shown me that students learn best through lessons that

⁷¹ Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*, (New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2002).

match their strengths and learning styles. Mirroring teaching strategies that I know are successful in the classroom, I will show pastors and youth directors a variety of ways that mindfulness works for teenagers. Rather than just outline an entire program, which has already been done elsewhere,⁷² I would like to introduce a few of the more common methods of mindful meditation and demonstrate their usefulness when working with youth. With that in mind, those reading this can use the outline to adapt the methods in a way that works to meet the diverse needs of different church groups. As a teacher, I know that what works with one group of adolescents might not work with others. Indeed, what works with one adolescent might not work with others and what works on one day might not work on others. Each group leader is the best gauge of what will work with his or her individual participants—trust yourself to know your own group, especially if you've built rapport with them over a long-term relationship. It is more important to remember that just as meditation is a practice, often requiring multiple trials to “see results”, taking on any new activity with your youth group follows the same model. I encourage you to try different methods to see what works in your individual setting.

One thing that is important is that before beginning an activity that is new for young people and might challenge them to think differently about themselves and the world around them, there is an established culture of trust in the group that allows for the exploration of self that happens. In my own youth groups and classrooms, I have used an adapted version of guidelines established by VISIONS, Inc. that I found helpful in my

⁷² For example, see *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: The MBSR Program for Enhancing Health and Vitality* (Linda Lehrhaupt, 2017), *Guided Mindfulness Meditation: A Complete Guided Mindfulness Meditation Program from Jon Kabat-Zinn* (John Kabat-Zinn, 2005), or *The Learning to Breathe Student Workbook: A Six-Week Mindfulness Program for Adolescents* (Patricia C. Broderick, 2013).

own learning. These guidelines are something we use for all activities, not just something introduced for mindfulness practices. They establish a culture of trust, encourage divergent thinking, and invite self-reflection. With guidelines such as “trying on,” “practicing self-focus,” “taking responsibility for one’s own learning,” “confidentiality of what is shared,” and “noticing both process and content,”⁷³ I am better able to transition to an activity that might be new and not meet too much resistance. This is particularly important because mindfulness does not fit the traditional product-based model for learning that is so common in our culture. Establishing a culture where young people feel comfortable trying on new ways of learning is vital to the productive implementation of any mindfulness program.

4.1 Dharma and Mindfulness

As we seek to establish mindfulness programs with our young people, we would be remiss if we didn’t turn our attention briefly to the spiritual roots of mindfulness practices. Even as individuals across the country attempt to integrate mindfulness into work and school programs without any reference or discussion of religion, I want to acknowledge the philosophical and religious doctrine that these practices arise from. One of the major reasons I decided to focus this thesis/project on establishing mindfulness programs in denominational church youth groups is because I want to honor, not dismiss, the sacred roots that mindfulness has in different religious traditions, particularly Buddhism. Thus far, I have spoken primarily about the positive impact of mindfulness

⁷³ See the Appendix for a full version of the VISIONS, Inc. Guidelines as I have adapted them for working with high school youth.

programs on adolescents from the perspective of how it helps them individually. I would like to broaden our study a bit to look at the ways in which mindfulness can help Christians as we live in community with other religious groups and seek to build bridges. I believe that mindfulness is one way that we as Christians can honor the wisdom from another tradition even as it informs our own faith and belief.

As mentioned previously, one thing that my experience working with young people has shown me is that they are curious about other cultures and open-minded enough to be amenable to new understandings. When introducing mindfulness to your group, it makes sense to use the occasion as a means for showing them the rich cultural heritage and history of Buddhist thought. My groups have been particularly interested in learning more about the history of the Dalai Lama and his position in world affairs, particularly in relation to the conflict in China over Tibet, which is something most of them have heard about in history class or from popular culture. As I introduce the concept of mindfulness, I talk to the kids about the basics of Buddhist thought, particularly those concepts that are common in multiple schools of Buddhism even as I remind them that, as in Christianity, there are numerous different Buddhist traditions that vary in thought and interpretation. Introducing the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path is usually enough to orient their understanding so they can begin to frame questions to themselves and one another. This is a good place to start because it is something that all schools of Buddhism acknowledge and something that relates directly to the idea of mindfulness.

Most students are familiar with the concept of karma: the word has become common in English, and most know enough to know that it means something about getting one's "just due" or fairness, although the concept goes much deeper than that in Buddhist thought. In relationship to the concept of karma, the concept that I think makes the most sense to introduce in detail when beginning mindfulness programs is the idea of "dharma". Dharma is often translated into English as "duty," although the word has no exact English equivalent. In Buddhism, it is related to, but not the same as, the idea of "right livelihood" expressed as one of the steps on the Noble Eightfold Path. In short, "dharma" is the way that human beings conduct themselves in the world. Dharma, in detail, is "the essential nature of a being, comprising the sum of its particular qualities or characteristics, and determining, by virtue of the tendencies or dispositions it implies, the manner in which this being will conduct itself, either in a general way or in relation to each particular circumstance."⁷⁴ In other words, dharma is how people act toward one another and groups of others, how one honors one's true self in the world, and how one honors the individual and idiosyncratic qualities that make up an individual.

There is a close relationship between the Buddhist idea of dharma and the Christian idea of calling. This will become important in the final chapter of this thesis/project as the concepts of mindfulness are related to the idea of vocation. In Buddhism, one can begin the process of the alleviation of suffering (*dukkha*, the fundamental condition of humanity) by identifying the root cause (attachment, or *trishna*) and seeking the alleviation from this attachment by following the Noble Eightfold Path.

⁷⁴ Stephen Cope, *The Great Work of Your Life*, (New York: Bantam Books, 2012), page 21.

This path consists of different steps on the way toward enlightenment (*nirvana*) such as right thought, right action, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The comparison to Christian calling is clear if we compare the words of Christian writer Frederick Buechner: “By and large, a good rule for finding out [your vocation] is this: The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.”⁷⁵ Our calling (dharma) arises out of the idea of the world’s great need (alleviation of suffering). It is through the fulfillment of our dharma, or vocation, that we can find happiness.

4.2 Model Mindfulness Strategies

Mindfulness as discussed in this thesis/project arises largely out of the Buddhist tradition. “Right mindfulness” is the seventh step in the Buddhist noble eightfold path, which Buddhists have followed for centuries before it began to gain popularity in the West. Mindfulness can be approached in a variety of ways, but I’d like to address two specific strategies at this point: first, strategies that address stillness, and second, strategies that address movement. Leaders can use these during any type of church gathering and in any space: in the sanctuary, during bible study, as a transition to a new activity, or even taking the strategy outside, remembering that it will be strange for some young people to sit or move quietly when they are more accustomed to the chaos of modern society than to listening to the quiet sounds of their own breath. In order to prepare participants for mindfulness, I recommend doing a few simple exercises to get

⁷⁵ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Searcher’s A, B, C*, revised and expanded. (New York: HarperCollins, 1963, 1993), page 118.

them acclimated to the stillness involved in many of the strategies that I suggest. It will be strange for some of them to sit quietly in a group without talking or relying on their phones to give them something to engage with. They will initially be distracted by the sounds around them, the presence of one another, the vibrating of their phones, and anything else that has the power to attract, distract, and keep attention. In fact, these are the same things that distract students from the process of learning in the classroom. I showed in chapter 3 how through practicing the art of refocusing the attention, adolescents can use the mindfulness strategies they learn to help them achieve academically. Since attention is a trainable skill, the more that young people practice, the more naturally the activities will come to them. Some simple exercises to get groups started are things like taking a “mindful minute” to listen to your breath, mindful sitting, or simple sound meditation. There are many scripts and models available for practices such as mindful sitting and mindful breathing.⁷⁶ By starting with slow, short practices of meditation, participants—and leaders—can ease into mindfulness as they put into practice.

The first mindfulness strategy that I’d like to introduce is directly patterned after the medical model that I introduced in the first chapter. At the heart of the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program is the body-scan meditation, and this method can be easily adapted from the clinical hospital setting to work for church youth groups. Kabat-Zinn argues that “much of our preoccupation with how we look comes from deep-

⁷⁶ I suggest using one of Kabat-Zinn’s widely available mindfulness scripts, many of which are posted for public use on YouTube, but there are also several available from other sources. The UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center has several different ones that are easy to use and freely available on their website as well.

seated insecurity about our bodies.”⁷⁷ With this in mind, helping adolescents *experience* their bodies without judgment can be instrumental to improving self-esteem. Since the meditation is traditionally done while lying down, this can work well in a carpeted space like a youth room or church sanctuary. This is also an activity that works well outdoors. Leaders, using their own voice or a recording, guide participants through a scan of various areas of the body, usually starting at the feet and working up through the body and out of the head. Move as quickly or as slowly as is appropriate for the group participants. The purpose of this activity is twofold: first, “the idea in scanning your body is to actually *feel* each region you focus on and linger there with your mind right *on* it or *in* it. You breath in *to* and out *from* each region a few times and then let go of it in your mind’s eye as your attention moves to the next region.”⁷⁸ The second purpose is that the body scan practices the art of “movement-to-movement awareness. Each time the mind wanders, we bring it back to the part of the body that we were working with when it drifted off.”⁷⁹ This way, we use the mindfulness exercise as an opportunity to train our attention, which we’ve already learned is a skill that can transfer to other areas.

A second mindfulness activity that is successful in youth groups is a mindful “check-in.” Whereas “checking in” with youth group participants verbally is a widespread practice, I am suggesting that we give our young people space to check in with themselves as well, or even instead. A verbal check-in can put a significant amount of pressure on young people to “say the right thing” in front of a pastor or look a certain

⁷⁷ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 75.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 77.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 79.

way in front of peers. We already know that an adolescent's sense of self-esteem is one of the primary causes of stress in their lives. If this is the case and our youth are editing verbal responses for approval by leaders, then the "check-in" lacks authenticity. There are videos available to guide practitioners through the practice,⁸⁰ but the basic outline is a self-check-in.

Various ways of checking in are checking in on participants emotional, physical, psychological, or spiritual well-being. You can encourage participants to answer a series of questions in their mind as you guide them through the exercise. This is not meant to be a verbal "check in", but a guided conversation with the self. One way to categorize the types of questions that a leader might ask is in three parts. The first questions can center around how one interacts with the self. Questions can range from the direct, "How did I feel when I woke up this morning?" or "In what ways have I been kind to myself today?" to the more complex, "How have I used time wisely or unwisely today" or "What have been the things that have caused me stress today?" or even "In what ways have I honored God in my life today?" Be sure to pause between questions to allow participants to think through each prompt. Exercises such as this are partly about inviting self-reflection through stillness and quietude, so make sure to give your participants the space for the quiet to enter. The second set of questions can be related to how one interacts with others. Ask students to reflect on questions that are focused on relationships, such as "How have I treated others today?" or "How have my interactions with others made me feel?" As ministers and volunteer church leaders, we know that encouraging healthy

⁸⁰ Elisha Goldstein, *Uncovering Happiness*, 206.

and fruitful relationships is a huge part of ministry. For youth—and this was the case for me during certain periods of my own participation in church—relationship with other youth can be the primary reason for participation. Give them space to reflect on their relationship with others. The third set of questions can be forward thinking: how one envisions the self moving forward. Questions like “How can I meet the goals I have set for myself,” “What obstacles stand in the way of progress for me,” or “How do I feel that God is calling me” can be helpful to participants as they envision a future for themselves. Depending on the group, it might make sense to do each of these over a series of several meetings, not all at one time. Mindfulness requires time and attention, and the most important recommendation I can give is not to rush through the activities. It can seem strange even for pastors and youth directors to sit in silence with adolescents, and I encourage leaders to participate in the practice authentically, not just guide young people through. These “check in’s”, and the conversations that follow them, can be a valuable tool for increasing trust and building relationships, which is another positive result of mindfulness.

A third method of mindfulness that has worked well in my groups is a mindful eating exercise. This is a widespread practice in meditation, and it translates easily to working with teenagers and even much younger participants. Generally, eating is associated primarily with taste. It is natural to associate food with taste primarily, as that is largely how we’ve been socialized. In a mindful eating exercise, participants are asked instead to engage all five senses in the process of eating, which is something most of us rarely take time to do. Give participants a small item to eat, such as a piece of chocolate,

a strawberry, or a piece of dried fruit. Check to see if any have allergies ahead of time. However, even if a participant has an allergy or doesn't want to eat the "assigned" food, this activity can work. For example, the last time that I did this with a group, I used chocolate kisses and I had one participant who did not like chocolate and chose not to eat it. Using the guided meditation, she was still able to participate in four of the five "senses" that are noted during the activity. You can even ask group members to imagine their favorite small snack or recall a memory associated with that food. When handing it out, make sure to specify that participants shouldn't eat it right away. Then the leader should guide members through eating by using all five senses, ending with taste only after sight, touch, sound (noticing the sound of the wrapper or the "squish" of dried fruit as one squeezes it between fingers, for example), and smell have been explored. Many scripts for this activity can be found online, as it is a rather common meditation practice. As with many other practices, it has its roots in Buddhist meditation practices. After the activity, take the time to process it with the group. Give them ample time to talk about eating in general and what role food plays in their lives now or what role it plays in their personal history. Food can be a powerful conversation starter among diverse groups, for example, as food is often connected to one's family, one's heritage, one's ethnicity, and even one's economic background. Scientists discovered long ago that the part of the brain responsible for memory was closely linked to the part of the brain responsible for taste and smell; this is precisely why a particular food might transport us to a certain point in our personal experience even if we don't consciously intend for it to do so. As you converse, participants may wish to compare this experience with the last time that

they ate a particular food. You might be surprised by what you find out. I was shocked to find out how many of my participants hadn't eaten anything at all the day of the exercise—the piece of chocolate that I gave them was the first thing they had eaten! Aside from the opportunity to start a conversation about the importance of eating a healthy breakfast, this activity can be the start of great conversations about home and family life.

Turning away from mindfulness activities that invite introspection through stillness, I'd like to suggest a few mindfulness activities that invite introspection through movement. Movement meditation can take on many forms, and I have discovered this strategy to be exciting. First, I would like to discuss strategies that can seamlessly be integrated into a Sunday school curriculum or bible study because they can be tied directly to course content. One reason I suggest this strategy is that it is a way of integrating mindfulness to “try it on” before making an extensive or overt commitment. One form of movement meditation is something that classroom teachers already regularly do: a gallery walk. This teaching strategy involves students getting out of their chairs, pushing them to the sides of the room, and walking around the classroom to contemplate a series of artwork or objects on display. When translating this activity to a bible study or church group, this can happen in a few different ways. Many churches already have artwork, stained glass, statues, or icons in the sanctuary. There is something powerful about inviting young people into a sacred space—generally reserved for formal, minister directed worship—to explore it silently. Inviting adolescents up to or behind the altar can be a powerful symbol for them of breaking down the hierarchical structure that has

historically governed the church. I distinctly remember as a youth group member when we were invited to decorate the Christmas trees on and behind the altar. Having grown up in a church where women were not allowed to be pastors, read the gospel, or even serve communion, this was an important undertaking for me. The message of inclusion in being present on or behind the altar is clear, and these activities address this inclusion. This can also be done in relation to church history, such as a contemplation of historical photographs about a particular topic, or it can be done as a more overt meditative practice, perhaps by contemplating artwork from different seasons of the year. Whichever method you choose, remind participants to observe the feelings that they have as they move about the space and contemplate the different works on display. During the debriefing, invite participants to share information about the process and the content, both of which will work together to contribute to the overall experience.

Another form of movement meditation is walking. Walking meditation can take on many different forms, but I have found both of the following methods to be useful with groups. First, I propose we go outside. When I suggest this activity, adolescents are immediately engaged for one obvious reason: it's often a novelty to get out of the building. Walking meditation came very naturally to me after having studied *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. In this text, Thoreau, an avid naturalist, spends countless hours walking around Walden Pond. Aside from being a forward-thinking environmentalist, Thoreau knew a few things about vocation. In *Walden* he writes, "be resolutely and faithfully what you are... Be humbly what you aspire to be... man's noblest gift to man is his sincerity, for it embraces his integrity also." He asks us, his readers, to "go

confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined.” Thoreau understood and lived his vocation no matter what the cost or what social problems arose from his choice. Walking in Thoreau’s metaphorical footsteps, I worked to retrain the adolescents I work with to walk slowly together, pointing out and noticing the small things they might miss while hurrying from one place to another. This can train us to be more attentive to the things we miss on an everyday basis and can help us move from the “doing” mindset discussed earlier to the “being” mindset. Thoreau saw each leaf, branch, and tree as a microcosm for something larger. This idea of looking at individuals as they exist as a part of something greater can be hugely meaningful to youth, who are searching for their place in society and the world around them. This activity would work well with church bible study groups as well, especially if a leader were to tie it in with relevant scriptural passages or hymns.

The second form of walking meditation is to *just walk*. This is walking meditation that takes place not to go anywhere or observe anything in particular. Instead, one moves the body in order to still the mind. To emphasize the message, have participants “walk in circles around the room or back and forth in lanes [to help] put the mind to rest because it literally has no place else to go and nothing interesting happening to keep it entertained.”⁸¹ If you are worried that this will become disorganized, you can use masking tape or paper squares with arrows drawn on them to literally “point” your group in the direction you’d like them to go. This can even work well in a traditional sanctuary space, provided you “map out” the path for your group. I know from

⁸¹ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 115.

experience that if you have them travel too far or through too many rows, it can end up hurried, frenzied, or chaotic. Another idea is that if the furniture in the space you are in is moveable, arrange it into a labyrinth or maze-like design where the beginning and the end are very near one another, allowing students to continue through the design more than once. Labyrinth meditation has a rich history in many traditions, and I know at least one of the churches I have attended⁸² has an intentional labyrinth patterned on the floor of one of the meeting rooms. If something like that is available to you, use it! For most, creating a “labyrinth” will require some creativity, but this form of mediation can be highly useful. In a world where most movement is functional, movement for the sake of introspection will invite a different kind of self-reflection. It serves the same purpose of stilling the mind by body movement minus a destination. Therefore, the end result becomes a stilling of the mind through movement.

Lastly, as one more movement exercise for leaders who are achieving positive outcomes with mindfulness in their youth groups, I would suggest the option of a full-scale yoga class as well. Personally, I have had encouraging results by bringing yoga instructors into different student groups. Check with church members as a first resource: you might already have a yoga instructor working in your congregation. Another possible resource is a local yoga studio, which might have teachers who are still in training and looking for opportunities to gain practice hours as they acquire certification. One year, I even found a teacher from my own yoga studio that welcomed the opportunity to teach a class as a community service activity and in order to introduce new

⁸² University Lutheran, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

practitioners to the practice. Although most of my group had never practiced before, the vast majority of them were eager for the opportunity. I find that adolescents are most engaged when two conditions are met. First, it is successful when the yoga class occurs outside of the usual meeting space, perhaps outdoors on a warm spring day after having invested some time and effort into other mindfulness activities. Second, it works well when I bring in an outside instructor or “guest teacher” for the class. Of course, when weather hasn’t cooperated or a guest teacher wasn’t available, I’ve also had success indoors, guiding the exercise myself. I would suggest the latter option only if you are comfortable with the basic postures of yoga and have practiced it regularly yourself for some time.

It would be impossible to introduce every possible strategy for mindfulness comprehensively. I hope that the information I have given in this section can be adapted, added to, and personalized to suit the needs of different groups in a variety of church settings, youth groups, and congregations. It was my goal to introduce basic strategies to give my readers a sense of what might be possible as they begin to approach the practices of mindfulness. Knowing that what works in one setting might need adjustments before it works elsewhere, I hope that these strategies can inspire leaders to think about the ways that mindfulness might be a useful tool for adolescents in a variety of settings. Next, we will turn to how church culture can contribute to mindfulness.

4.3 Community Approach

“For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.” –Romans 12: 4-8, NRSV

In order for the idea of mindfulness to work it should ideally be a whole community approach and not just a program that one or two leaders undertakes. It should also be a part of a larger youth program that builds relationships between adult mentors and young people even as it encourages a rich study of scripture. For us to model mindfulness in an authentic way to the youth groups in our congregation, we must avoid the mindlessness and chaos that beckons from the outside world. As pastors, youth directors, and church workers, our lives are full of chaos and stress, and the benefits I have felt from my own practice of mindfulness are palpable. Since there is so much supportive data in the field as to how much of an impact that mindfulness has on overall wellness, it seems logical that churches get on board. Engaging with mindfulness as a community will be helpful to leaders as well as those in our congregations. Any of the programs I suggest in this chapter would be applicable to adults in the congregation even though they are designed for young people. In fact,

“As we begin to work with these kinds of approaches with children, we have to root this work in scientific research, as well as in sound pedagogy and child-development theory. Most child-development theory has focused on personality development and on the emotional and intellectual realms; only rarely does it consider the inner or intuitive dimensions of experience. However, we can’t think about giving our children these skills and ways of being without getting support in the nurturing of our own inner lives. Many of us want to help our children find deeper purpose

and meaning, but we can't give what we don't have. Soul work isn't about giving our children a road map. It must flow from the quality of our own inner lives.”⁸³

In other words, those of us who work with young people must practice what we preach: we need to be mindful in order to teach others to be mindful. It is only by engaging in our own practices of mindfulness that we can model the behavior authentically to our participants. By this means, “What a legacy we can leave our children, by offering them concrete ways to strengthen the core of who they are.”⁸⁴ Leading by example is one way to make this happen.

In addition to mindfulness programs for pastors and staff members, a whole church approach might include a prescribed time of day or day of the week for members to engage in mindfulness activities. The idea of “Mindful Mondays” or “Tranquil Tuesdays” could be an activity for the whole congregation, staff and adolescents included, to participate. In a very active congregation where members are likely to participate in church events during the week, this might be something hosted on site. In smaller congregations or groups that draw from several different towns, it might make more sense to do the activity virtually. I know that my home congregation draws from so many different towns that we have found as a community that it is a challenge for people to attend weekday activities because of the commute. In churches like mine, mindfulness could happen “virtually” and take on many different forms: it could be as simple as an email with verses to meditate on or a suggested “Mindful Monday” activity. It could even be a recorded meditation uploaded to YouTube. As anyone planning church

⁸³ Linda Lantieri, *Building Emotional Intelligence*, 137.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

activities already knows, using whatever resources you can and fitting them into the style of your home congregation is key to the positive execution of any program.

Another strategy for a “whole church approach” might be to integrate the value of mindfulness and process based learning into the mission statement for the church. The mission statement is a public declaration of the values set forth by a particular church or group, and a testimonial that highlights the value of mindfulness based practices could do a lot to support individuals who wanted to engage with the process. I know that my own church has a mission statement that promises to “provide for the spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being of its members.” As someone who has attended a variety of different churches across the US in a variety of different faith traditions, I feel strongly that churches do a better job of providing for the spiritual and emotional than they do with providing for the physical. Mindfulness would be a fantastic way to unite the spiritual and emotional with the physical.

We have seen in this chapter the various ways that mindfulness can be integrated into youth programs and how churches can be supportive of ministers and youth directors who want to take on the challenge. We have seen earlier in this thesis/project how mindfulness can contribute to academic, physical, and emotional well being of the youth in our congregations through attentional training and stress reduction. Next, let us turn to the ways in which mindfulness can help adolescents become aware of their agency toward vocational discernment and understand their place in the world after they leave high school. Using mindfulness as a tool for helping adolescents discern vocation is an exciting opportunity for leaders to help direct and guide the young people they work with

onto a path for happiness and well-being. This is one way that we can change the lives of the young people we work with in a positive way.

Chapter 5

Discerning of Vocation: Beyond Youth Groups to American Classrooms

“Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice out there calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice in here calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.” — Thomas Merton

At most high schools in the United States, discernment of vocation is not part of the general academic curriculum. With an increasing focus on standardized testing and college admission, public high schools have become merely a stepping stone on the way to “bigger and better things”, particularly college, instead of a place for vocational discernment and character development. This process by which young people develop into more *self-reflective* and *self-reflexive* persons is essential to help students discern who they are and how they act as they begin to encounter larger life contexts, and right now it’s being minimized. High school students are often so focused on grades, Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) scores, and the college admissions process that little time is left for them to genuinely consider their purpose. This purpose or interior vocation that I believe is an innate part of our being, needs to be investigated by adolescents as early on as possible; we need to engage them in a process whereby they can explore this aspect of the self, and I believe that mindfulness is one key way of doing that.

In modern society, individuals are bombarded with information from all directions. Many argue that an abundance of choices is inherently good. After all, with more choices an individual is most likely to get exactly what he or she wants. When

buying a car, for example, or shopping for shoes, through trial and error an individual can receive the best “fit” possible. However, there is another phenomenon that a number of scientists and social psychologists have noticed: too many choices can be paralyzing. Barry Schwartz writes that when confronted with too many choices, “consumers are less likely to buy anything at all.”⁸⁵ He argues that while choice itself might be seen as good, in controlled studies too many choices decreases satisfaction from situations as trivial as choosing an ice cream flavor to situations as meaningful as selecting a career. He contends in his TED Talk that when confronted with too many choices, the responsibility of failure rests not on the institution or “the world at large” but on the self for having made the wrong selection. Adolescents have a name for this: FOMO. FOMO, or “fear of missing out”, is the anxiety produced because something better might be happening somewhere else. This phenomenon is one factor for why young people and adults alike can become so absorbed in social media. Their fear of missing something, whether it’s news, a social event, or something else, outweighs their willingness to be *present* where they are. The skills developed in mindfulness practices can help combat this fear.

The overwhelming number of choices that an adolescent makes might be one factor in why the discernment of vocation is so difficult for them. Many don’t even want to think about it, and others are fearful to they admit that they haven’t made a choice. Adolescents need opportunities to discover their vocation as it relates to their coursework in a way that allows for and encourages self-reflection. As we saw in the second chapter, students are sometimes disengaged with classroom learning because they fail to see the

⁸⁵ Barry Schwarz, “More Isn’t Always Better,” *Harvard Business Review* (Harvard Business School Publishing, June 2006), Accessed May 27, 2017.

application of assignments to their lives, and one way that we can improve this is through the mindfulness activities discussed throughout this thesis/project. Since teachers, staff, and administrators at the high school level do not always have the appropriate training and language to adequately discuss vocation with students in order to help them discern their own vocation, churches can help direct this aspect of student learning. One central claim I have is that it is imperative that vocational discernment become part of youth programs in church settings. Since mindfulness is most successful if engaged in groups with a high level of flexibility and trust, youth groups are the perfect space to conduct these activities. Educators can also integrate vocational conversations into traditional academic classes to help students see the relevance of their class work and apply it to their own interests, skills, and gifts, yet it is only outside of the classroom where programs of mindfulness that often are rooted in Buddhist traditions can be authentically practiced. Once this happens, adolescents could make informed choices upon graduation, selecting a path that is appropriate for them instead of following the “college as a stepping stone” mentality that is part of the national debate about “college for all” today. A clear path before graduation would lower college dropout rates and increase clarity for those entering the workforce directly.

Unfortunately, with budget cuts in many districts, course offerings are becoming less diverse, meaning that electives are not as varied or widely available—instead, students are encouraged to focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) or at the very least, on their core subject areas no matter what direction personal interest

points them to.⁸⁶ Young people are often encouraged to focus on subject areas that traditionally offer increased earning potential rather than listen to their inner voice and try to discern their true vocation. Indeed, teenager's lives are often so fast-paced and overscheduled that they don't have time to stop and even consider that simple age-old question: *what do I want to be when I grow up?* More importantly, I would argue that reframing the question itself would be helpful. Instead of asking adolescents what they want to *be*, why not ask them who they are already and how that might play a role in the process of becoming an adult? Using Buechner's contention as a guiding frame, the question might become instead: How can I find ways that the things that bring me joy can meet the needs of the world?"

5.1 Vocational Guidance in Schools is Insufficient

Most schools have guidance counselors assigned to each student, and some schools even have a career center in house or career counselor on staff. However, these resources are generally seen as separate from the school's academic coursework. Furthermore, the function of a guidance counselor has changed so much in the past generation that little time or effort goes into discussion of vocation. While in the past, "guidance counselors in high schools helped students with self-assessments, encouraged students to ascertain their abilities and helped to set them on a career path", the role has

⁸⁶ Supporting the idea that for many schools, STEM and CORE subject areas are the only ones that matter, many schools don't factor elective courses into a student's grade point average. For a student who is primarily focused on the arts, for example, this can send the message that their chosen path matters less than a science or mathematics major.

shifted in the past decades.⁸⁷ Not only because of budget cuts but also because of the shifting methodologies of public schooling in America, “today’s counselors, perhaps more than any other members of public school faculties, have witnessed an explosion of responsibilities. The testing culture has permeated public schools over the last decade, and so counselors have been assigned more tasks related to training and administering the end-of-year or ‘highstakes’ testing.”⁸⁸ Anyone who has worked in the public school system knows that these tests take days to administer and weeks (or even months) to prepare for and organize. Since few schools reduce caseloads even when counselors are shouldered with additional responsibilities, that not only means less class time for teachers, who often help proctor the tests, but also less time for guidance counselors to work with students on issues of vocation and discernment.⁸⁹ Unfortunately, “In many schools, traditional responsibilities assigned to counselors fell by the wayside for lack of time or in deference to scheduling and discipline problems. State and federal mandates have also filled the plates of traditional counselors. As priorities changed in schools, counselors’ job priorities changed as well.”⁹⁰ Sadly, schools often prioritize test scores and data-driven, statistically measurable results over other success markers for students. This prioritization has led to a decline in anything resembling vocational discernment or even career counseling.

⁸⁷ Eugenia Newell, “Career Counseling in Urban Public Schools Is Critical Today,” *Techniques: Connecting Education & Careers* 89, no. 1 (January 2014): 11, accessed August 26, 2014, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁹ The increasing responsibilities of both teachers and counselors is a huge problem in our educational system. Larger class sizes, larger caseloads, and the shouldering of additional responsibilities are all too common practices. Although I can’t address that topic in depth in my own thesis, there is a great deal of research on this topic already.

⁹⁰ Eugenia Newell, “Career Counseling in Urban Public Schools Is Critical Today,” 11.

Even for schools that do offer alternatives to traditional academic only instruction, it is sometimes seen by students as an either/or opportunity. *Either* students participate in vocational education programs, often attending a separate school entirely, *or* they stay in the more standard traditional academic program and prepare for college. The problem is that both avenues, conventionally, are seen as a path to a “job”, meaning “career,” not as an exploration of true vocation. Indeed, even the brightest students could probably not offer a detailed definition of “vocation”, which has become synonymous with “paid work” only, expressing “the sad state of affairs in which an originally expansive concept has become tidily constricted (and conscripted) in modern life.”⁹¹ With the exception of students who are gifted in the visual or performance arts, high school students are often at a loss for “what to do with their lives”, and entering college as “undeclared” has become the number one response at even upper tier schools such as Northeastern and UCLA. Although some might see it as a positive that students are attending college at such a high rate, “at any university, the dropout rate for students who enter without declaring a major is always much higher than that of those who attend committed to a course of study.”⁹² Since evidence states that undeclared students drop out of college at a much higher rate than others, we need to consider ways of helping the adolescents in our churches discern both the nature of their personal and discerned vocation and possible career areas from one concentration or major. This should happen before students and parents write a check for tuition or sign on to massive student loan debt.

⁹¹ Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*, (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), Kindle Electronic Edition., location 73.

⁹² Kenneth Gray, “Is High School Career and Technical Education Obsolete?” *Phi Delta Kappan* 86, no. 2 (October 2004): 131, accessed August 24, 2014, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

In addition to insufficient guidance around vocation, the elitist attitude of many students, parents, teachers, and administrators can be a substantial barrier to student achievement. One of the “bragging points” of a top-rated American high school is the percentage of students that go on to attend college. Some of the major factors in “rating” American high schools are a college readiness index, math and English proficiency (according to standardized test scores, of course), teacher to student ratio, and the percentage of students who attend institutions of higher learning. Some of these metrics contain useful data, yet I’m not sure that pushing more and more students into college programs before they are ready is the answer. As stated previously, one of the most common “majors” on college applications, even at top tier universities, is “undeclared”. Personally, I know that many of my students move into their college dorms excited and with breathless anticipation of “college”, but their anticipation has nothing to do with what they will study or major in, since many of them have no clue what they want to do.

Additionally, there are so many students who enter college needing to take “remedial” courses in reading, mathematics, and writing. This is evidence that those students are not yet ready to attend college. At most institutions, those courses do *not* count towards graduation requirements, so that tuition money is essentially donated to the college. In fact, “David Boesel and Eric Fredland, researchers with the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, say college for all ‘sweeps many marginally qualified and unqualified students into colleges’ [and] each year, more than 600,000 students leave four-year colleges without graduating, a figure that, they say, raises ‘extremely complex questions’ about public policies that provide financial aid packages

to low achieving students.”⁹³ Even for students who do stay in college, the average number of years that it takes students to graduate is now five years instead of four. American students would benefit from three things: (1) mindfulness programs that encourage exploration of authentic vocation; (2) more opportunities to explore careers, volunteer, or do social service through internship programs; and (3) when necessary for further maturity and academic engagement, “gap year” programs. The question becomes: how do we support adolescents in our congregations so that they graduate high school with a better idea of how they want to spend not just the next 4 years, but the next 40 years? Researchers Marie Cohen and Douglas Besharov from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education say “educators and policymakers should reconcile the ‘conflict between two goals’—equalizing students’ life chances and preparing students to succeed in a differentiated labor market—instead of pushing college for all. They also say schools should prepare students to succeed in both college and career and technical education.”⁹⁴ This is a more realistic and helpful approach to many students who might otherwise be pushed toward college without a clear goal in mind. In addition, since mindfulness increases overall health and wellness, it’s clear that developing this skill early will help students not only during college or while settling into their first job, but also for the rest of their lives.

The elitist attitude of high schools that seek only to prepare students for college is unhelpful to a large number of students, leaving them out of the equation entirely and

⁹³ Susan Black, “College for All?” *American School Board Journal* 194, no. 6 (June 2007): 52, accessed August 20, 2014, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

setting them up for future failure, not success. The college for all attitude is sadly an attitude adopted by top policymakers in our country, and

“according to the U.S. Department of Education appointees, all teens want to go to college; therefore, high school should be only about teaching English, math, and science. Proponents of this view argue that the traditional academic curriculum is the best approach; after all, it worked for them, and it will work for all students once we get highly qualified teachers into every classroom and certify the deficit via standardized testing. The implication is that CTE [Career and Technical Education] is incompatible with NCLB [No Child Left Behind] and, therefore, obsolete.”⁹⁵

Without even considering the host of other problems with NCLB, this issue is massive, rendering high school “irrelevant” for the high percentage of students that enter the workforce directly or who drop out of college shortly after enrolling.⁹⁶ In fact, “National Public Radio’s Larry Abramson recently reported that more than half of all community college students fail to complete their two-year programs.”⁹⁷ Students who drop out were likely ill-prepared and ill-suited to attend college straight out of high school. These

⁹⁵ Kenneth Gray, “Is High School Career and Technical Education Obsolete?”, 128.

⁹⁶ There is some interesting historical background regarding the shift in understanding the nature and purpose of education in this country: “It is fascinating to observe the degree to which the current debate about CTE in high schools is a historical rerun. The main question is whether or not students are best served by a common academic curriculum or by a differentiated curriculum that offers alternatives. In the early 1900s, it was exactly such a debate that first led to the rather widespread adoption of CTE. At the turn of the last century, high school enrollments mushroomed as more and more families found it economically possible to keep their children in school beyond the eighth grade. To that point, only the children of the wealthy had attended high school, and for these students one curriculum—the classical/academic curriculum—was just fine. The new breed of high school student, however, found little of interest in this program of study. Much to educators’ alarm, many of these new high school students soon dropped out, causing something of a national scandal. The specter of hordes of out-of-school but unemployed teens roaming the streets was enough for the establishment to demand action. The solution was to have more than one program of study. Thus the high school curriculum was differentiated into academic and vocational education” (Gray 129). This historical paradigm sheds light on the issues today, and policymakers could learn by paying attention to the lessons from history. In addition, Herr provides a succinct summary of the legislation that has had an impact on vocational programs, including “the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1984, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, and the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. The U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Labor (1988) also published a booklet addressing basic skills in the workplace” (Herr 280). These might be worth further study

⁹⁷ Susan Black, “College for All?”, 52.

students are also ill-prepared to choose a satisfying vocation directly out of high school because there have likely been no opportunities or programs to help them do so. Pushing students toward college without considering the potential costs is detrimental to them in the long run, and can set them up to be behind peers who chose to enter the workforce directly when one considers that “students who drop out of four-year universities earn about the same as those in two-year colleges [or those who have technical training and certification programs] but they pay more in tuition and often have hefty loans to repay.”⁹⁸ For many students, college isn’t the answer, and that’s something that we have to accept when working with young people in our congregations. Contrasted to the fact that college made sense for many of us as we developed our vocations, and our formal education continues to enrich us both in our work lives and in our personal lives, the fulfillment of mentoring is to allow adolescents in our congregations to find and develop their own vocations, not the ones that society deems “best” for them. What worked for us may not work for those we mentor.

As a teacher, I know that classroom learning isn’t always the best thing for students. Sadly, even some of my highest achieving students are often more concerned with grading than with learning. In addition,

“as anyone who has ever taught high school will attest, even among teens who attend the very best high schools, many simply hate school. They have never done well in school, see no relevance in it, never do assignments, and habitually cut classes or are truant. Why should we be surprised that these students do not want to go to college? More to the point, why do policy makers seem to want to deny the existence of students who exhibit these attitudes and behaviors? Perhaps

⁹⁸ Susan Black, “College for All?”, 52.

they hope that more math and science instruction and more standardized testing will turn them around.”⁹⁹

I often hear from students that they will “do better” when they are able to study only the subjects that they want to study even though many of them still aren’t sure *what* they even want to major in. Additionally, most of them fail to understand that in a traditional liberal arts program (which is where the highest percentage of them are headed), they will still be required to take many courses outside of their selected major as part of the liberal arts curriculum. The standard at many colleges is 8 courses, which equates to at least two semesters of instruction, and that doesn’t always include basic writing or seminar courses that are sometimes required of entering freshmen. Students who “hate school” will likely not do well in these programs. Even with all the evidence to the contrary, “parents and educators push children toward college, believing it’s their only chance to have a better life... But students who’ve barely scraped by in high school soon discover that colleges are not lenient about late homework and low test grades... Some find out college isn’t what they expected, and many fail.”¹⁰⁰ In addition, when I ask my intentional non-learning students what kind of job they see themselves having in the future, many who plan on attending college have no idea, although some have the vague intention to major in business. Even the ones who have what they consider a clearly defined “major” often don’t know what they want to *do* with that degree after college. One perfect example is the student who wants to go into the medical field but has no commitment to or real talent in science. On the one hand, I don’t want to be the evil teacher who crushes the dreams

⁹⁹ Kenneth Gray, “Is High School Career and Technical Education Obsolete?”, 131.

¹⁰⁰ Susan Black, “College for All?”, 51.

of a student, but on the other hand, why are we allowing kids to set unrealistic goals? If students are largely unsuccessful in high school, barely passing classes and graduating marginally, it follows that they will likely be unsuccessful in college.¹⁰¹

Even for students who are 100% sure they want to attend college, programs that integrate vocational discernment would be beneficial. It could help in the process of making meaning out of one's education. Asking students to engage in self-reflection might help them to see the relevance of their coursework by making connections in the classroom to a vocation. In addition, this method is likely to work better than leader-centered methods because it depends less on the skill level of the instructor and more on the leader-facilitated critical self-awareness of gifts, skills, and interests for adolescents as they explore their own interests and opportunities. When participants engage thoughtfully with their learning, leaders can guide them to see connections to the academic content, but it is still up to individual participants to determine what exactly their interests are. When questioned, "students stated there is connection between schooling and vocational opportunity [therefore] there is potential for schools to become

¹⁰¹ This issue is personal for me for a variety of reasons. Every year, I hear about students who contributed to the "success" of Chelmsford's numbers by attending four-year colleges but then drop out come fall. Last year, I had an Endicott dropout, a SNHU dropout, and two UMASS Amherst dropouts. Additionally, two of my seniors last year failed the journalism class that I taught, and since I've never had a student fail the class, I was shocked. Both students are attended four-year colleges in the fall, Plymouth State and Clemson University, and both dropped out of college within the first year. For the first student, who received a 15% in my class, a vocational program would have been instrumental—I think seeing other options would have helped him choose something other than a four-year school. The other would have attended college regardless but was unable to see value in the instruction he received in high school.

more aware of students' aspirations and expectations.”¹⁰² In this way, we have an active role in guiding adolescents to a sense of purpose through true awareness of vocation.

5.2 Adolescents Need More Purposeful Discernment of Vocation

One of the biggest problems that high school teacher's today face is the lack of student engagement. There are many ways to define “engagement”, but in short, “school engagement involves positive attitudes toward school, teachers, classmates, and academic learning, whereas disengagement encompasses student perceptions of school as boring, unwelcoming, alienating, and largely irrelevant.”¹⁰³ Students who are not engaged in the learning process more often than not perform poorly in school. We have seen how mindfulness programs in youth group settings can help students connect their academic lives with their spirituality in the church and help them decompartmentalize their experiences. Knowing that their learning has a greater purpose and giving students the opportunity to reflect on that purpose is meaningful to their experience and self-understanding. This strategy working in conjunction with the other strategies that are administered by teachers and administrators in the public schools.

Theorists have come up with an abundance of “student engagement strategies” to solve the problem of lack of engagement, from increased use of technology to differentiated instruction and everything in between. One problem is that many of the

¹⁰² Peter Sullivan, et al., “Junior secondary students’ perceptions of influences on their engagement with schooling,” *Australian Journal of Education (ACER Press)* 53, no. 2 (August 2009): 186, accessed August 20, 2014, http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/edu_article/36.

¹⁰³ Maureen E. Kenny, et al., “Setting the Stage: Career Development and the Student Engagement Process,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 53, no. 2 (2006): 272, accessed August 20, 2014, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

more popular strategies, such as Universal Design for Learning¹⁰⁴ or the “Kids do well if they can”¹⁰⁵ theory is that they put the burden primarily on the instructor to make the learning interesting and accessible, allowing the student to remain the “recipient” of the same material they teach to everyone else, perhaps in a different format. In recent studies during “structured observations of English and mathematics classes [while] there were a few disruptive students, the main conclusion is that students overall do not persevere on challenging tasks and the teachers often remove some of the risk by providing additional information, thereby reducing the challenge and the learning opportunities.”¹⁰⁶ Even with inventive teaching methods, what many fail to realize is that without connecting the content to individual students, they will remain, to some extent, disengaged. Of course, they will appear more attentive (what high school student today isn’t excited to have their own iPad or to study Shakespeare in the context of modern rock music?), but without making the content itself relevant to students, the only thing that might improve is their grade. For students who are unsuccessful in the classroom, “something inhibits the enacting of the implied… [and] there is little to gain by working to improve students’

¹⁰⁴ While on the surface, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a useful theory, in practice it sometimes fails. When instructors build in strategies for students who are struggling, it can sometimes seem like a dumbing down of the curriculum. It can also lead to dependence by students who no longer need the curriculum modifications or, in some cases, those who didn’t need them in the first place. As an example, UDL might call for the use of a teacher-created outline for essays to help students who struggle with organization. However, two things can happen. First, students might come to expect or rely on the outlines. Second, students who are able to organize their own essay might prefer the teacher derived material because it’s easier or because they perceive it to be “more correct” than something they create on their own. Therefore, I encourage the use of UDL carefully and only after attempting other strategies.

¹⁰⁵ One proponent of this theory is Dr. Ross Greene. He writes in his book, *Lost at School* that students who don’t do well *can’t* do well, and essentially contends that it’s up to the educator to figure out (and therefore correct) the problem. He says that the default preferred position is to do well, so all students *want* to do well. This is an extreme oversimplification in my opinion, and doesn’t take into account the structural issues that might be barriers to student success, not all of which can be overcome by educators.

¹⁰⁶ Peter Sullivan, “Junior secondary students’ perceptions of influences on their engagement with schooling,” 182.

orientations to learning, and much to gain by improving the ways that classrooms operate.”¹⁰⁷ Even though there are many external barriers to student accomplishment (particularly those barriers outside the classroom including class, race, and economics), there are some barriers that exist within the confines of the four walls of the classroom: those are the ones that can be addressed by creating more reflective students who take part in vocational discernment.

According to a 2004 literature review, “school engagement is closely linked to academic motivation and students’ willingness to invest psychologically in their education. Students with high levels of school engagement tend to be actively involved in their schoolwork and identify with the roles and responsibilities of being a student.”¹⁰⁸ Sadly, many traditional methods of increasing student engagement only target problems like attention span, behavior, and learning styles. Notwithstanding all of these barriers to student engagement—and therefore accomplishment of learning goals—in the classroom, what many fail to realize is that students need to see the relevance of schoolwork *outside* of the classroom. They need to see what practical applications school assignments have for them. The one feature that truly fuels academic motivation is meaning. On the one hand, “Career development programming has been identified as one means for positively enhancing student attitudes toward school and increasing student engagement”¹⁰⁹ because it allows students to see the value of classroom learning as primary to their future. On the other hand, I don’t think that these programs go far enough. They focus on the idea of

¹⁰⁷ Peter Sullivan, “Junior secondary students’ perceptions of influences on their engagement with schooling,” 182.

¹⁰⁸ Maureen E. Kenny, “Setting the Stage: Career Development and the Student Engagement Process,” 272.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 273.

selecting or getting a “job”, not of exploring true vocation. If we as church leaders take the strategy one step further by actively engaging students in the discernment process, they can better see their education as an opportunity to move beyond themselves and develop a purpose for their lives. I argue that one of the best methods for increasing engagement is giving students a purpose for their education: showing them there is a greater purpose to their instruction that goes beyond the walls of the classroom. We are always telling students that they should “Be the Change” or “Find their Bliss,” but we seldom give them direction for how to get there.

One thing that many theorists do have right is that most students *want* to do well. The problem is that they don’t see a direct or immediate connection between doing well in school and future accomplishment. In the same 2004 study, “the majority of students reported a strong sense of the importance of, and opportunities in, schooling, and saw English, mathematics and science connected to those opportunities... [however] this orientation was not matched by corresponding positive engagement with these same subjects.”¹¹⁰ The disconnect lies not in the subject area itself, but in the methodology. We need to develop strategies for showing adolescents that there is a meaningful link between course content and their lives outside of the classroom. Far too often, teachers, parents, administrators, and other adults rely on the “you’ll need this for college” answer, which is a mistake for several reasons. Firstly, even at the best public high schools, not every student wants to or will attend college. Secondly, most adolescents can’t conceptualize learning itself as an “ends” that is good and noble. Thirdly, students are

¹¹⁰ Peter Sullivan, “Junior secondary students’ perceptions of influences on their engagement with schooling,” 176.

smart enough to sense when the adults in their lives are giving them a non-answer. Many adults tell kids, “you’ll need this for college” for the same reason parents say, “because I said so”—they’re not really sure of the answer. Adolescents need to understand how and why their education can help them develop a vocation.

5.3 How Public Schools Can Help: Teacher and Counselor Engagement

There are several ways that public school can improve in the area of helping students discern vocation without using mindfulness in the classroom. In order for a vocational discernment program to be successful, teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators need to work together. We know that student engagement is a key, and that has been discussed at several points in this thesis/project. However, it is important to note that engagement is collaborative: the students will be invested if they see teachers, administrators, and the other adults in their lives as invested.

Since we’ve already seen *why* it is important to raise levels of student engagement in the classroom, the topic shifts to *how*. One key way for improving engagement, according to motivational scholars is through a “process of developing meaningful goals and assessing progress toward those goals [which] can provide students with purpose and motivation... one of the keys to enhancing motivation is for individuals to understand that a given set of activities will yield valued outcomes.”¹¹¹ One key component of this that is often overlooked is that the goals have to be developed by students, not by teachers. Even as teachers and counselors act as facilitators, which is a meaningful role,

¹¹¹ Maureen E. Kenny, “Setting the Stage: Career Development and the Student Engagement Process,” 273.

the content must come from students. Even if it is true that most teachers would love to see their students attend college, and many teachers like seeing their students pursue the subject areas they themselves teach, we must help students find their own strengths, talents, and gifts. We as teachers love receiving emails and visits from former students, updating us on college coursework, campus life, and academic interests, yet we also need to be aware that students have goals beyond college, too, and we need to help students become self-aware enough to begin discerning those goals before they take out their loans or write a tuition check.

Students in high school are developing a sense of self and they may have undiscerned values and goals beyond earning a college degree. The ways that vocation fuels career, college selection, or the choice of another path after high school can be an avenue for giving students greater purpose. To increase student engagement, “high school students [should] explore career opportunities and come to understand the value of academic subjects to their future career choices [and] their motivation for mastering what was otherwise an uninteresting subject may increase.”¹¹² More opportunities for vocational discernment in the classroom would allow students to “see school as valuable preparation for employment or other opportunities [and they] would actively engage in schooling.”¹¹³ This is true for students across a varied spectrum of ability levels as well: “students with high scores on the systemic assessments were no more likely to see school as important and useful or success as connected to trying harder than other students.”¹¹⁴

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Peter Sullivan, “Junior secondary students’ perceptions of influences on their engagement with schooling,” 180.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 181.

Programs that would be helpful opportunities for thoughtful conversation regarding discernment include but are not limited to field trips to explore different vocations,¹¹⁵ internship opportunities for junior and senior students,¹¹⁶ or more flexibility to the traditional required curriculum. Vocational discernment opportunities will increase student engagement, and therefore improve the ability students have to develop and meet their own learning objectives, helping schools meet their goals of educating students to become lifelong learners and productive citizens.

The current model of using high school guidance counselors only for addressing vocational guidance is ineffective. As mentioned earlier, counselors are stretched thinly as it is, and increased responsibility and caseloads make time for discernment opportunities difficult if not impossible. Furthermore, many students have no access to discernment at all, stating that they only meet with their guidance counselors for scheduling at the beginning of the year. Sadly, whenever I ask the students in my junior classes to indicate, by a show of hands, which of them feels like they have a close relationship with their guidance counselor, very few raise their hands. This trend is not limited to my own experience, and in fact, “The 2008 Association for Career and Technical Education Issue Brief... startlingly reported that ‘more than half of high school students say no one in their school has been helpful in advising [them] on career options or options to further

¹¹⁵ Another key that I’d like to mention is that it might make sense for field trips and programs such as those I suggest ought to start earlier. Even when schools offer career exploration opportunities, they sometimes wait until senior year to allow students to participate. As an anecdote, I have a student currently who has not been successful in the general high school curriculum. He dropped out last year for some time and ended up in night school, returning in the fall to the same required courses he was unsuccessful in during the previous year. It was on a recent field trip, 3 months before graduation, that he decided to switch to a vocational high school program. I wish that we were able to direct him to this change earlier.

¹¹⁶ Some high schools offer senior students internships or half day programs to explore vocation. This is a beneficial strategy for many different types of students, and I wish that more schools gave students this opportunity.

their education.”¹¹⁷ Even for the schools that have strong counseling programs, guidance counselors are not enough because they primarily focus on careers, not discernment, and programs for vocational discernment must be integrated into the school as a whole so students can see practical applications of their learning, not just job listings. Recent studies have found that “students enrolled in schools offering comprehensive guidance and counseling programs, including classroom guidance, obtained higher grades, and viewed school as more relevant than students enrolled in schools with less comprehensive guidance programs.”¹¹⁸ Comprehensive programs include more than one on one counseling, such as opportunities for students to engage in programs like shadow a nurse or sign up for internships during their junior or senior years. A comprehensive program would also include training teachers to become more effective at helping students with vocational discernment. This way, opportunities for discernment could be presented by instructors in the classroom and alongside course content instead of just as an aside. Considering the caseload of most guidance counselors, this is also a more realistic approach. Counselors simply do not have the time to meet with students regularly to discuss vocation when counselors have an average of 471 students in their caseload¹¹⁹ and they are also responsible for scheduling, organizing and administering standardized testing, counseling students in crisis, and sometimes even disciplinary infractions. Shifting some of the responsibility back into the classrooms would be beneficial for the students, teachers, and counseling staff at the high school level.

¹¹⁷ Eugenia Newell, “Career Counseling in Urban Public Schools Is Critical Today,” 11.

¹¹⁸ Maureen E. Kenny, “Setting the Stage: Career Development and the Student Engagement Process,” 273.

¹¹⁹ According to The American School Counselor Association. That is for all grade levels: for high school students, the average is closer to 250, but in some areas, it is much higher.

Because of state requirements about intervention for at-risk students, some schools are now adding “advisory” periods into the school day. On paper, this meets the mandate that there be time scheduled during the school day to offer support to students who have a D or F average. However, the group of students in my advisory class are *not* students that I teach in the classroom. In fact, they are not even the same grade level that I teach, so it becomes more of a study hall than anything else. This “study hall” means less time on academic content for all other classes. Although helpful in theory and fulfilling the on-paper requirement, since “districts are looking for alternative ways to provide these vital services to high school and even middle school students, [these] ‘Teachers as Advisors’ class periods (known in some schools as Advisory or College and Career Readiness periods) seek to provide skills assessments and information on careers to all students in an organized forum.”¹²⁰ The main problem with this model is that the advisors are not working on a set curriculum with the students. Connecting to *other* teachers’ classes is rather difficult when we don’t necessarily know the content. It would be much more effective for teachers to work with students who they also teach in a more academic setting. This would require a restructuring of the program, but would be beneficial in the long run.

It is clear that programs that integrate vocational discernment and classroom learning are helpful to students in planning for the future, that they contribute to student engagement, and that they increase student success after graduation. In short: “students reporting greater career-relevant instruction indicated significantly higher levels of *school*

¹²⁰ Eugenia Newell, “Career Counseling in Urban Public Schools Is Critical Today,” 11.

engagement and valuing [education] [emphasis mine]... For students to perform well in school, they must believe that their focus on education will pay dividends for them now or in their future.”¹²¹ Whether we call it “career relevant instruction”, “vocational discernment”, “school to work”, “careerstart”, or something else, the bottom line is that programs like this lead to greater student accomplishment and all of the aforementioned benefits. A research study out of Boston College suggests that “Higher levels of career planfulness and expectations at the beginning of the year were associated with increases in school engagement over the course of the year. The observed relationship between career planfulness and expectations and school engagement is consistent with emerging models of career development that seek to explicate the value of career development programming as a component of educational reform.”¹²² The key for our approach will be to shift the senior year question from “where are you going and what are you majoring in?” to “what is your passion and how will your passion meet the needs of the world?”

There will be other benefits to these programs as well. The implication is that students are not the only members of the learning community that need facilitation for growth beyond what is good for the individual in society, but as the individual is a social creature intended to be interdependent on other humans, alone and in community, all individuals in this process benefit. It is clear that “Aside from strengthening our democracy, public education’s role is arguably to promote individual opportunity and economic growth. This suggests that the viability of educational programs should be

¹²¹ Dennis K. Orthner, et al., “Improving Middle School Student Engagement Through Career-Relevant Instruction in the Core Curriculum,” *Journal Of Educational Research* 106, no. 1 (January 2013): 27, accessed August 20, 2014, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

¹²² Maureen E. Kenny, “Setting the Stage: Career Development and the Student Engagement Process,” 272.

measured against the degree to which they promote these ends. It is of interest to ask, for example, what problem NCLB is supposed to be solving. Better yet, what problem is more math and science instruction and mandatory testing supposed to solve?”¹²³ As schools build more and more options and courses into the STEM areas, I fear that they are neglecting the values that most teachers hold dear: guiding students into finding their own vocation and helping mold them into good citizens that will make a difference in the world around them. Remembering the life purpose of a teacher that exists beyond the self for the common good is key to understanding why a program like this is so important, and

“our efforts will be futile if we do not unleash every ounce of energy we have to reclaim the vocation of the teacher as a friend and guide to the learner’s emerging maturity. Whether in the church or in the school, we must encourage growth and change in our teachers, work to free them *from* thinking of themselves as civil servants hired to do a job to thinking of themselves as guides—teaching boys and girls, men and women, their heritage, how to hunt and gather, how to sow and harvest, how to dance and worship, how to pray and wait and expect, how to write poems and paint the legends; to walk in the wilderness, to experience awe in the laboratory, to communicate with others near and far.”¹²⁴

Once teachers are cast *back* into this role and step away from the gradebooks and standardized test scores, real change can start to happen. In short, without implementing more programs for vocational discernment, “the high school dropout rate will probably increase; work-bound students will graduate prepared only for low-skills/low-wage, dead-end employment; and tech prep, the only high school academic program specifically designed to prepare students for college-level technician training, will be gone... less

¹²³ Kenneth Gray, “Is High School Career and Technical Education Obsolete?”, 130.

¹²⁴ Dorothy C. Bass, “The churches, the public schools, and moral education.” *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 79, no. 1 (December 1, 1989): 16, accessed August 24, 2014.

opportunity for students and, in the long run, less prosperity for us all.”¹²⁵ A shift in thinking away from the current theory would ultimately help students and teachers both understand that “our lives are intricately entwined with the lives of others and indeed with the whole of creation… [it’s] not telling others what is right and what to do, but helping them choose what is good, and right, [forcing] us to acknowledge that good and evil happen by what we do; good and evil are not primarily the results of other forces, conditions, instincts, accidents, habits.”¹²⁶

At first, programs like this might seem daunting and even stressful for teachers and students. The question of “where do you want to go to college” is stressful enough, but adding on “what is your vocation in life” can throw them for a loop. However, we need to trust adolescents to meet the challenge and think about these questions for themselves rather than follow a generic one-size fits all plan. Students respond better when they are actively engaged in the decision-making process: for example, they tend to perform better in elective classes, even required electives, where they have a *choice* as to what the content of the course is. We as teachers need to follow a few set principles as we embark on this journey with our students: (1) we need to engage in *dialogue* and be in relationship with our students; (2) we need to give students opportunities to *practice* their interests and be of service to those around them; and (3) we need to give them *confirmation* that affirms the good in their efforts, even if the primary result of a given opportunity is to try something else.¹²⁷ The confirmation can often happen through

¹²⁵ Kenneth Gray, “Is High School Career and Technical Education Obsolete?”, 134.

¹²⁶ Dorothy C. Bass, “The churches, the public schools, and moral education,” 15.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 25.

reflection on their experiences and the self. With reflection happening inside the schools, in dialogue with teachers and counselors, and outside of schools in mindfulness activities with pastors and church leaders, students will be best equipped to discern vocation. We need to help students decide on both a philosophical and practical level what they can do in life that will make them truly happy, acknowledging that it might take a lifetime to answer that question. So why not start asking it earlier?

Conclusion

I think it would be wrong to say that I didn't always want to be a teacher. What is more accurate is that for a long time, I didn't have the ability to understand the vocation that already existed inside me: that is, that teaching was and is the way I substantially fulfill my purpose and meaning in life in service to others and the world. Teaching, together with being a spouse, mother, and daughter, has created in me the kind of person I am in the world. This, ultimately, is what inspired me to revisit and to write about the idea of vocation. When I graduated from college, I wasn't sure who or what I would become, but I did know that I wanted to work with students. I found a place as a resident assistant throughout two different graduate programs, but I still felt a pull toward the classroom. Perhaps the pull was because of a love for literature; perhaps it was a love of learning; perhaps it was a desire to work with children and youth. The desire to teach has always been part of me, but it was only when I was given the opportunity to see how my talents could meet the needs of others that I was able to name my vocation and begin to work toward its fulfillment. Discovering my gifts and talents and the ability to see how they could meet the needs of others was something that took a fair amount of time to understand, although I do recognize that it was still far earlier for me than for others. Further, it is largely because of my own race and class privilege, in addition to my abilities, that I was able to have the time and resources to accept and begin living into that vocation. This, combined with my earlier experiences working with college students who were still unsure of their vocation, was what inspired my thesis/project. Through my own work as a teacher, I was encouraged to want to help others find their vocation and

develop a method for entering into vocational discernment at a younger age. In doing so, I hope that sharing it with other teachers can be useful.

I am grateful for the meandering path that led me toward my vocation. Looking around the high school where I work, I know that my background is different than most other teachers. Initially, I saw this as a negative. I didn't start with the classroom management skills of more experienced teachers and I struggled with some of the job requirements that my colleagues who had attended traditional teacher education programs found easy. Making rubrics, understanding the rules of special education plans, and teaching students who were not native speakers of English were all particular challenges for me. I have used the resources available to me through my district to compensate for this, such as additional coursework, professional development, and in-school supports. Yet my training in mindfulness and my experiences with vocational discernment from my time in seminary allowed me to see my different experiences as an advantage rather than a disadvantage, a power to use on behalf of others. I think my unique background allowed me to see the way that mindfulness could reframe one's thinking. With the knowledge I have from my experience as a teacher and my experience in seminary, I was able to conceive of this thesis/project. I will continue to develop it as I work with adolescents in various capacities.

Together, these chapters have formed the overall claim of this thesis/project: mindfulness is an essential tool for academic well-beingness, physical and emotional health, and vocational discernment. As a teacher, my gifts and abilities no longer make my background seem like a negative in comparison with those undergoing the standard

process in becoming a teacher. Although my experience is limited and large-scale studies will take time, my individual teaching experiences and those of other teachers, combined with the relevant research in the field, indicate that mindfulness programs can have a powerful and lasting impact on students' self-understanding. In a variety of ways, students can and do engage mindfulness as a developmental and educational tool not only to help motivation, but also for assistance in finding value in their educational experience. Most importantly, mindfulness programs assist in directing students to see their purpose in life as larger than just a career or a mere means to a paycheck. Mindfulness, when practiced with intention in church-based youth programs, is beneficial to students independently or when combined with classroom supports such as vocational exploration.

Mindfulness helps students see the self in relation to others and to the world around them. Programs and activities such as the ones that I have described help students understand that they have a place and purpose in what may seem like an increasingly chaotic world where the demands on them as individuals seem beyond their reach. The positive results of these programs vary, yet many include things such as the ability to find one's true vocation, to see the personal in the structural nature of the world, and to engage in informed civic participation. Mindfulness becomes a vehicle to transform adolescents beyond the "me-ism" and the self-centeredness that pervades our culture. It becomes a way for them to see how their skills, talents, and gifts can be the answer to the world's needs, desires, and hopes. It is the vector that threads a person's character, development, and sense of agency in relating the self to the larger community.

Individuals develop a sense of compassion and meaning in how they engage with the world around them, utilizing one's gifts, skill, and insights in large measure through mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a discernment process necessary for the illumination of vocation so that students can integrate the work they have done in the classroom and through their own study with their interests and talents. Mindfulness is a practice for focus and attentiveness to grow in the ability to see one's self, talents, and skills in their true light and for one's true purpose or vocation in life. Mindfulness is a self-discipline in bringing one's self-awareness to the forefront in the service of purposeful wisdom and action throughout one's life. Mindfulness helps students answer the great questions that go beyond "what do I want to be when I grow up?" and instead include "*who* do I want to be when I grow up?" Mindfulness allows students to investigate their true purpose so that they can achieve satisfaction, agency, clarity, contentment, and happiness. Mindfulness takes practice and requires investment, but there is no better asset than to invest in inner lives of our students. Our attentiveness to them will be reflected through their own fulfillment of vocation as they become agents that forge forward into the world after finishing high school.

It is my hope that students and teachers in the community of learning can help one another to establish balance, find stillness, and live out their full vocation to find a life that is meaningful and fulfilling. By finding a meditative balance, mastering the ability to center ourselves among the chaos of the world around us, opening ourselves up to the listening process that allows us to hear the voice of our vocation, we can live a passionate

life full of joy. The great transcendental thinker Henry David Thoreau writes in the final chapter of *Walden* that “if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours... In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex.” Parker Palmer reminds us that, “Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.”¹²⁸ It is my hope that by helping students to clear out the clutter in their own lives and minds, they are opened up to the possibility of listening to their inner voice, the voice that tells us who we are and the possibilities of what we might become. I believe that what that voice says, and how they respond to the vision of their vocation, is more transformative and meaningful than anything else I can do for them in my classroom.

¹²⁸ Parker J Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2000).

Appendix A:

“Listen to the Mustn’ts” by Shel Silverstein

“Listen to the Mustn’ts”

Shel Silverstein

*Listen to the MUSTN'TS, child,
Listen to the DON'TS
Listen to the SHOULDN'TS
The IMPOSSIBLES, the WONT'S
Listen to the NEVER HAVES
Then listen close to me-
Anything can happen, child,
ANYTHING can be.*

(“Listen to the Mustn’ts” from Where the Sidewalk Ends. Copyright © 1974 by Evil Eye Music, Inc., HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.)

Appendix B:

VISIONS GUIDELINES (adapted to fit the needs of adolescents)

STEP 1: I suggest that when using these guidelines, you post the condensed version (below) in a large font or on a poster board somewhere in the room. I leave mine up all year once we have discussed them. It makes them easy to refer to and serves as a reminder to us all.

Classroom Guidelines:

- * Try on
- * It's Okay to Disagree
- * It's Not Okay to Shame, Blame, or Attack Oneself or Others
- * Say Ouch
- * Take 100 Percent Responsibility for One's Own Learning
- * Practice Self-focus
- * Practice "Both/And" Thinking
- * Be Aware of Intent and Impact
- * Maintain Confidentiality
- * It's Okay to Be Messy
- * Other Additional Guidelines???

These guidelines are adapted from VISIONS, Inc. 2003, an organization that helps individuals look at the impact of unconscious assumptions, biases, and power imbalances on their personal behavior as well as on an organizational level.

(continues on next page)

STEP 2: Below, I have explained each of the guidelines in detail. The explanations are similar to the ones presented by VISIONS, Inc., but adapted to fit the needs of a high school classroom. I print up the guidelines as part of my “Introduction to the course” at the beginning of the year. We spend at least a class period talking about what each guideline means and sharing stories of where and when these guidelines are important and (depending on the group) places where they have been violated either in the students’ personal lives or in the media.

Classroom Guidelines:

* Try on

- To try on a new idea or belief does not mean that I judge my former idea or belief as wrong. It means that I do not judge the new behavior as wrong.
- I am willing to see the benefits and disadvantages of different ways of behaving.
- Some ideas or ways of acting are “acquired tastes.” Like getting used to a new pair of shoes, one may need time to try out the benefits of a new idea or a new way of relating to others.
- If you don’t try on anything new, you are stuck with the same old ideas and methods, and your learning will stagnate.
- Whenever you try on something new, you always have the option of going back to what you knew and believed beforehand.

* It’s Okay to Disagree

- When disagreement is not allowed, people don’t show up fully
- If I am afraid that what I will say cannot be heard in a particular group or community, I may be hesitant to speak and if I do speak, I will be always on guard.
- I may even develop a type of split personality—bringing only the “acceptable” part of me to the group, and sharing the part of myself that is not acceptable in other places.

* It’s Not Okay to Shame, Blame, or Attack Oneself or Others

- Phrases such as: “How could you possibly think that?” or “Only an idiot would believe...” are unacceptable

* Practice Self-focus

- Use “I” statements—make a commitment to speak in the first-person singular about what you think, believe, or feel. The point is to avoid unsupported generalizations, such as: “People think …” or “Everyone believes….” When I speak in generalities from a place of power or privilege, without acknowledging my status, I foster monoculturalism by speaking as if what I am saying is true for everyone, rather than simply my opinion or my group’s way of thinking
- Listen to yourself and the information from within that you may overlook. Pay attention to the feelings that you are experiencing while someone else is speaking. Self-focus is being aware that these are your feelings. Something the other person said or did may have been a stimulus, but the feelings are yours. When we don’t exercise self-focus, we often “listen with our answer running” and are in danger of not paying attention to the speaker.

* Say Ouch

- It is important to interrupt shame, blame, or attack as quickly as possible, even if one does not know what to do next. When we are practicing self-focus and noticing a feeling of fear, anger, or loss, we might want to literally say “ouch” to alert the group to the impact that some words or actions are having on us. The facilitator may then interrupt what is taking place to focus on what the impact has been on the person who said “ouch.” When we agree to this as a guideline, we agree that it is okay to slow down the content to allow for the processing of feelings that impact an individual, even if the intention was not to inflict hurt.

* Take 100 Percent Responsibility for One’s Own Learning

- When learning about and celebrating differences, it is very important to take responsibility for one’s own learning. Most importantly, this means that I do not expect the people who are the most vulnerable or underrepresented in a group to teach me what I need to know if I am in a position of privilege.

* Practice “Both/And” Thinking

- Some of us grew up with an “either/or” worldview; some with “both/and” worldview. Underlying either/or thinking is an attitude, unusually unconscious and unarticulated, that I am superior to the person with a differing position, or that the other person is inferior to me. We may not even notice how deeply either/or thinking is ingrained in our way of living because it is part of our worldview. We are like fish swimming in the water and not noticing the water around us.
- The practice of both/and thinking often means substituting the word “and” for the words “but” or “however” in a sentence.

* Be Aware of Intent and Impact

- Intent is my intention or motive in doing or saying something. Impact is the effect or consequence my speech or action has on another person or persons. Sometimes we make comments that we do not intend to be racist, sexist, elitist, heterosexist, insensitive, or oppressive, and nevertheless another person is deeply impacted by my comment. The person who feels hurt or offended may then accuse me of inappropriate behavior and may even say that they think the remark was racist, sexist, and so forth. The conversation quickly escalates, and both of us become defensive.

* Maintain Confidentiality

- Confidentiality is important in one-to-one interactions, in learning groups, and in classrooms. It has to do with boundaries and safety. On a personal level, I may choose to take certain risks or to try on new ideas and behaviors. I might even be willing to expose my assumptions or discuss my personal theology if I have a sense that what I am saying will not be made public outside of the context in which I am speaking. Simply put, this guideline means that everyone agrees not to tell one another's personal stories.

* It's Okay to Be Messy

- One of the primary assumptions of learning about and celebrating differences is that no one is perfect. We are all on a journey. Because we are human, we will make mistakes. Being messy is part of trying on. Because we are human, we will sometimes have a negative impact on another person. It's forgivable. The point is to learn from what others tell us about the impact on them. Others in the groups will also learn. If you are constantly on guard about making mistakes or afraid of the impact you might have, it will be hard to try on new ideas and behaviors. Making mistakes is not, however, an excuse of shaming or blaming others or for failing to account for one's impact on others

Appendix C:

We long for living truth and justice and peace
for living words between people
for living generosity and patience and steadfastness,
for meaningful work, and for warm humor, and
We dream of a Sky turned to Ocean, and a heavenly fish
leaping through its waves!
We long to be of service, and we dream of an oak whose
heart is open like petals.
We long for practical knowledge, and we dream of a
hand-made bowl overflowing with milk,
and the milk is running into the field, where it
is being lapped up by deer, and the antlers of
the deer are harps vibrating with song
and along the singing antlers elemental beings are
dancing with diamonds between their funny teeth,
And the foundation of a building is sinking into the
field where the deer are lapping and the deers are
dancing, and the walk are rising and particular
practical arts of civilization have begun —
Here the miller, here the smith here the mason, here
the gardener and here the child and here the
priestess and here the donkey.
The dream wakes into consciousness. Where do we
want to begin? The milk is running over, the
earth is making new foundations for us, the
people are walking in.
What do we wait for? We wait for imagination to take
us free of our habits. We wait to imagine that we
might actually make something we like, make
something new and good and decent, make a difference,
do something, feel good about the world, feel in
harmony with ourselves, be co-creators in
a courageous and forward-looking community—
keeping faith in all kinds of weather. We wait to
feel supported by others.

—Mary Caroline Richards, *The Public School and the Education of the Whole Person*

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